



PRELIMINARY REPORT

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF "PARENTAL ALIENATION" ALLEGATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.

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uOttawa



PARENTAL
ALIENATION &
DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FOR INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

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This report presents preliminary findings from an international survey conducted as part of a research project entitled *Parental Alienation and Domestic Violence: International Partnership for Innovative Strategies*, funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The main objective of the survey was to document the impacts of “parental alienation” discourses and practices on abused women and their children.

The online survey was conducted between October 2022 and April 2023 in the following 13 countries: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In total, 911 participants completed the questionnaire¹.

This report is divided into six sections, starting with the participants’ profiles. The second section focuses on men’s violence towards women and children. The following sections examines the “parental alienation” allegations, and the impacts of these allegations on custody arrangements and on other aspects of women’s and children’s lives. The sixth section focuses on women’s attempts at challenging “parental alienation” allegations.

1. Participants’ Profiles

To participate in the survey, women had to meet the following criteria:

- She was 18 years old or older;
- She had at least one child under 18 years old;
- She had experienced domestic violence and abuse perpetrated by the child’s father, which could include physical violence, sexual violence, verbal or psychological abuse, financial abuse or coercive control;
- She had been through either child protection or child custody proceedings, which could include but does not have to include court proceedings;
- She had been seen as an alienating parent at some point during these proceedings, whether or not the term alienation was explicitly mentioned;
- These allegations were made in one of the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States.

Table 1 shows the number of women who took part in the survey, according to the countries where they resided when they completed the questionnaire.

Most women who participated in the survey (457; 50.2%) were between 36 and 45 years old, while approximately a third of the participants (284; 31.2%) were between 46 and 55 years old. There were 138 participants (15.2%) under 35 years old, and 31 participants (3.4%) aged 56 or older.

Seventy-four women (8.1%) identified themselves as racialized or belonging to a minority group based on their skin colour, and 13 women (1.4%) identified themselves as Indigenous women. In addition, 55 women (6%) had been concerned about accessing services for themselves and their child due to their immigration status in the country in which they resided.

Most participants had completed a higher education degree. Indeed, 65.5% of the respondents (597) held a university degree, while 16% of the respondents (146) had completed a college degree, and 14.3% of

¹ The participants who completed less than 60% of the questionnaire were not included in the sample. In all questions, participants were given the option to select *Prefer not to answer*. This data is not presented in this report.

the respondents (130) had a secondary or high school diploma.

Table 1 – Countries where the women resided

	Frequency	Percentage
Australia	26	2.9
Belgium	11	1.2
Brazil	109	12.0
Canada	143	15.7
France	147	16.1
Iceland	77	8.5
Ireland	2	0.2
Israel	15	1.6
Italy	130	14.3
New Zealand	4	0.4
Spain	40	4.4
United Kingdom	105	11.5
United States of America	73	8.0
Prefer not to answer	6	0.7
Other	23	2.5
Total	911	100.0

Almost 80% of the women who took part in the survey had one or two children. In total, 359 women (39.4%) had one child, and 327 women (35.9%) had two children. The other participants had either three children (145; 15.9%), four children (53; 5.8%), five children (15; 1.6%) or more than five children (10; 1.1%). Regarding the number of children who had been involved in the allegations of “parental alienation”, more than half of the respondents (56.1%; 511) reported that only one child had been involved in these allegations, while 30.4% of the respondents (277) reported that two children had been involved in these allegations. The other participants indicated that either three children (89; 9.8%), four children (19; 2.1%) or five children (5; 0.5%) had been involved in these allegations.

In most cases more than one child had been

involved in the allegations, the participants were instructed to answer the questionnaire with regard to the oldest child (who was still under 18 years old) who had been involved in the allegations. The average age of these children was 10 years old. There was a similar number of girls (466; 51.2%) and boys (423; 46.5%). The other participants identified their children as either non-binary (5; 0.5%), trans girls (3; 0.3%) or trans boys (2; 0.2%).

2. Violence towards Women and Children

The survey included questions regarding men’s violence towards women and children. These questions included questions regarding the disclosure of domestic violence and child abuse, even though we acknowledged that there are a variety of reasons why women and children may decide not to disclose or report these situations.

2.1. Domestic Violence and Abuse

All the women involved in the study had experienced domestic violence and abuse. Most women (868; 95.3%) had disclosed the violence and abuse that had been perpetrated towards them by the child’s father to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection proceedings (social worker, psychologist, lawyer, doctor, judge, etc.). More than half of the respondents (532; 58.4%) also indicated that the child had also disclosed domestic violence to at least one of these professionals.

In addition, 75.6% of the respondents (689) had reported the violence that had been perpetrated towards them to the police. Approximately a quarter of the respondents (244; 26.8%) indicated that the child had also disclosed domestic violence to the police.

Even though the vast majority of women had reported the violence to the police, only 121 women (13.3%) stated that the father had been convicted or found guilty in criminal proceedings.

2.2. Child Physical and Sexual Abuse

The research findings indicate that the allegations of “parental alienation” were not only associated with domestic violence, but also with men’s violence towards children. In this regard, Figure 1 shows that more than half of the participants (509; 55.9%) reported that the father had also perpetrated physical abuse towards the child, and 29.7% of the participants (271) reported that the father had perpetrated sexual abuse towards the child.

Figure 1

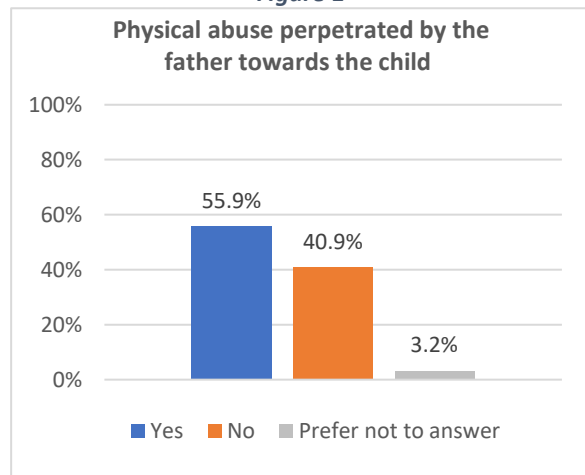
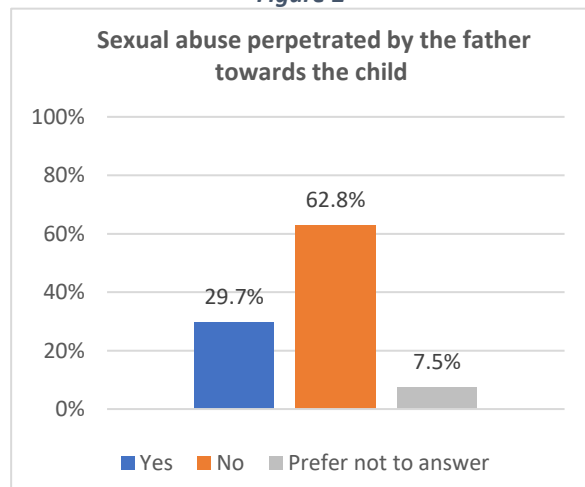


Figure 2



Amongst the women who indicated that the father had perpetrated child physical or sexual abuse, most women indicated that child physical or sexual abuse had been disclosed to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection

and had been reported to the police. Indeed, 94% of the women who indicated that the father had perpetrated child physical abuse (479) had disclosed this abuse to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection proceedings, and 382 women (75%) had also reported it to the police. The numbers were similar for child sexual abuse, with 251 respondents (92.6%) who had disclosed the sexual abuse to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection proceedings, and 230 women (84.9%) who had also reported it to the police.

Moreover, 77.4% of the women who indicated that the father had perpetrated child physical abuse (394) stated that the child had disclosed this abuse to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection proceedings, and 242 women (47.6%) stated that the child had also reported or disclosed it to the police. Furthermore, 203 women (74.9%) stated that the child had disclosed sexual abuse to at least one professional involved in child custody or child protection proceedings, and 137 women (50.5%) stated that the child had also disclosed or reported it to the police.

However, in most cases the father had not been convicted or found guilty in criminal proceedings for his abusive behavior towards the child. Indeed, the father had been found guilty or convicted in criminal proceedings in only 4.1% (21) of cases where the father had perpetrated physical abuse towards the child. The father had been found guilty or convicted in criminal proceedings in 3.3% (9) of cases where the father had perpetrated sexual abuse towards the child.

3. The “Parental Alienation” Allegations

Table 2 shows the different countries where the “parental alienation” allegations had been made.

Table 2 – Countries where the “parental alienation” allegations were made

	Frequency	Percentage
Australia	27	3.0
Belgium	14	1.5
Brazil	112	12.3
Canada	139	15.3
France	149	16.4
Iceland	78	8.6
Ireland	2	.2
Israel	15	1.6
Italy	137	15.0
New Zealand	4	0.4
Spain	43	4.7
United Kingdom	110	12.1
United States of America	81	8.9
Total	911	100.0

Figure 3 shows that, in most cases, the allegations of “parental alienation” had been made recently. Indeed, 58.7% of the respondents reported that the first allegations had been made since 2019.

The participants were also asked if the allegations of “parental alienation” had been made in the context of child protection or child custody proceedings. Figure 4 shows that, in almost half of the cases (427; 47.8%), the allegations had been made in both child custody and child protection proceedings. In contrast, 43.5% of the respondents (389) reported that the allegations had been made in child custody proceedings, while 8.7% of the respondents (78) indicated that they had been made in child protection proceedings.

Figure 3

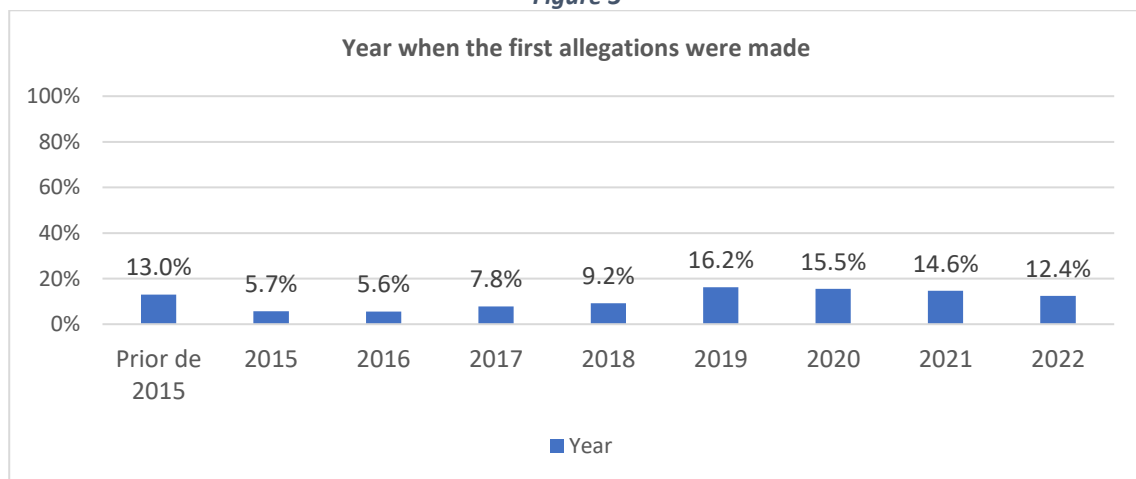
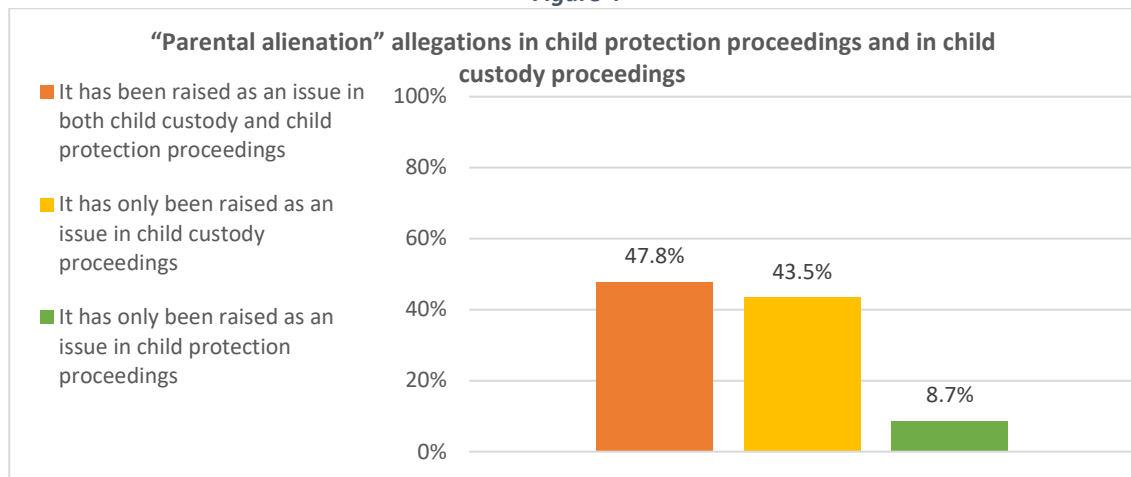


Figure 4



The participants were asked to identify who had described them as “alienating” mothers in the context of child custody or child protection proceedings². They were also asked to identify the first person who had made these allegations. Regarding child custody proceedings, the most frequent answers were the *father or father’s lawyer* (409; 95.8%), the *expert or professional who conducted an evaluation or wrote a report on the family dynamic or on custody evaluation* (210; 49.2%), and the *judge* (205; 48%). In most cases (328; 77.4%), the *father or father’s lawyer* had been the first person to describe them as “alienating” mothers.

Regarding child protection proceedings, the most frequent answers were the *father or father’s lawyer* (396; 92.7%), the *child protection worker or child protection lawyer* (183; 42.9%), and the *judge* (167; 39.1%). In most cases (285; 68%), the *father or father’s lawyer* had been the first person to describe them as “alienating” mothers.

Furthermore, 66.6% of the respondents (607) reported that “parental alienation” allegations had been made after they had raised concerns regarding the father’s violent behaviours, as demonstrated in Figure 5. These findings suggest that labelling abused women as “alienating” mothers can be a tactic used by perpetrators to divert attention away from their own violent and abusive behaviours.

Overall, most women (590; 64.8%) reported that the terms “parental alienation” and “parental alienation syndrome” had been explicitly mentioned. This is also true in most countries, as illustrated in Figure 6. It should be noted that Brazil is the country with the highest percentage of participants who indicated that these terms had been explicitly mentioned, which could be related to the fact that it is the only country that has adopted specific “parental alienation” legislation (Law #12.318/2010). In contrast, Spain and Italy were the only two countries where more participants reported that these terms had not

²The participants had to select one or more items in the following list: 1) father or father’s lawyer; 2) her own lawyer; 3) child’s lawyer or guardian; 4) police officer; 5) judge; 6) public/criminal prosecutor; 7) expert or professional who conducted an evaluation or wrote a report on the family dynamic or on custody/residence evaluation; 8) expert who has not conducted an evaluation; 9) child’s psychologist, psychiatrist or mental health professional; 10) her own psychologist, psychiatrist or mental health professional; 11) doctor/general practitioner; 12) family mediator; 13) supervised visitation services; 14) child protection worker or child protection lawyer; 15) others.

been explicitly mentioned. Spain is the country with the highest percentage of participants who said that these terms had not been explicitly mentioned, which could be

related to the fact that it is the only country that has a law that prohibits the use of the term “parental alienation syndrome” in court proceedings (Law #8/2021).

Figure 5

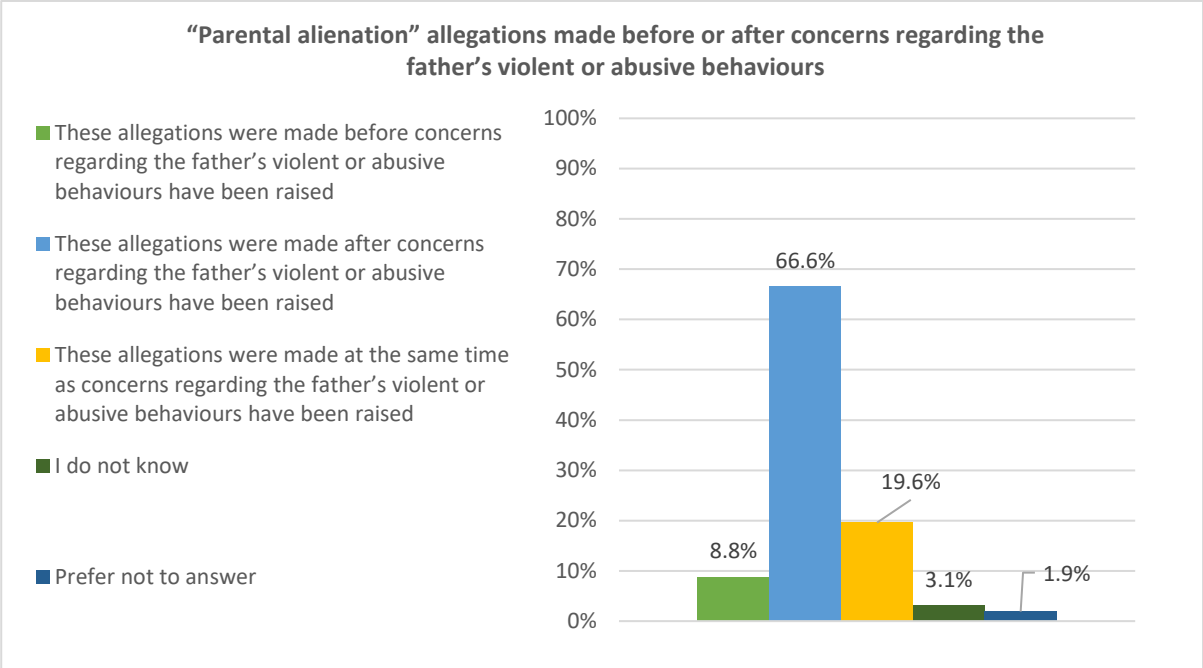
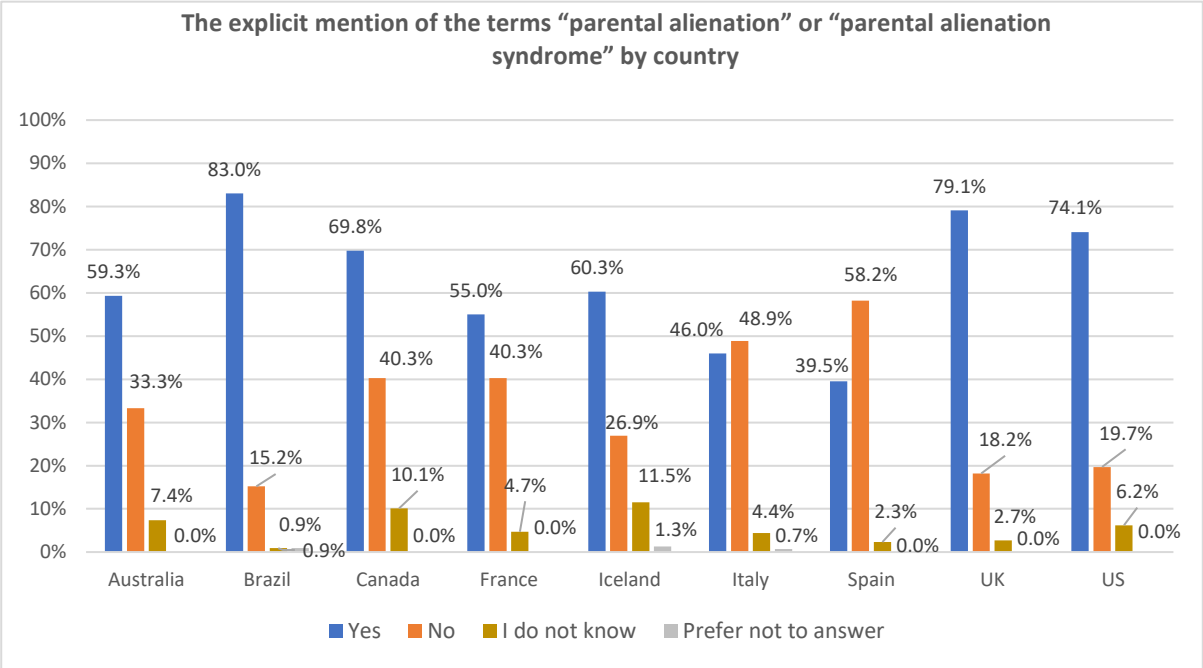


Figure 6



4. Impacts of “Parental Alienation” Allegations on Custody Arrangements

The participants were asked about child custody arrangements prior to and following the allegations of “parental alienation”. Figure 7 shows that most women had primary custody of the child before “parental alienation” had been alleged (532; 60.9%). Some participants reported shared custody (284; 32.5%), and the father had had primary custody in only 3.3% of the cases (29).

Most participants (556; 63.9%) reported that the custody arrangements had changed since “parental alienation” had been alleged. In this regard, more than 70% of the women

who reported that the custody arrangements had changed considered that the allegations had influenced these changes (435; 73.7%).

Figure 8 illustrates the custody arrangements following the “parental alienation” allegations, which were different from the custody arrangements before the allegations. In this context, 42.9% of the respondents (253) reported that they had primary custody of the child, while 26.3% of the respondents (155) reported that the father had primary custody of the child, and 22% of the respondents (130) reported shared custody.

Figure 7

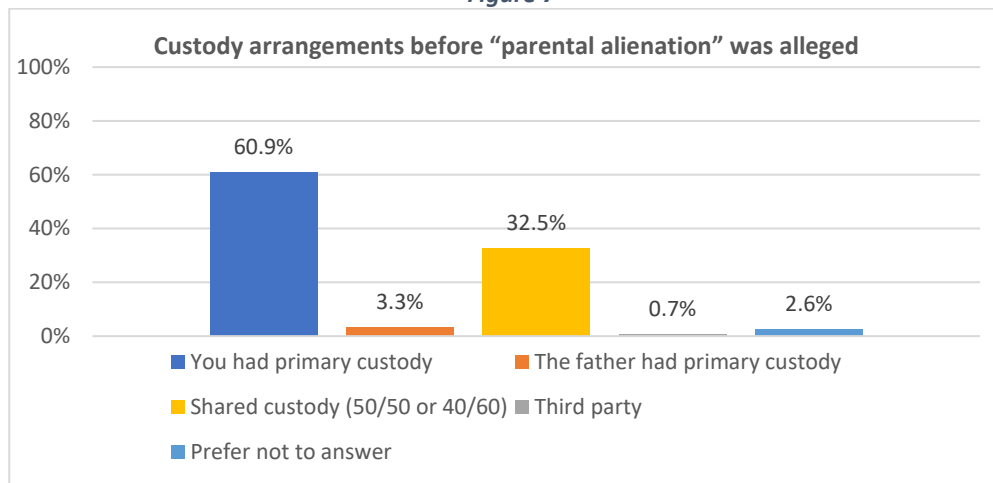
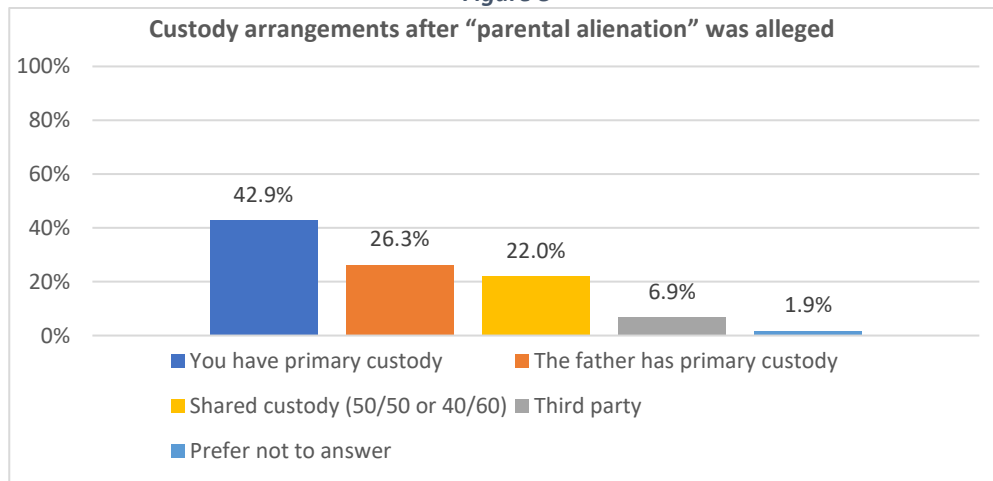


Figure 8



5. The Impacts of “Parental Alienation” Allegations on Women and Children

The participants were asked about the impacts of “parental alienation” allegations in different areas of their lives. In this regard, most women (836; 97.7%) considered that the allegations had affected their ability to heal from violence and abuse, and to regain control over their lives. Moreover, more than 70% of the women (610; 71.3%) considered that the “parental alienation” allegations had affected their relationship with the child.

The participants were also asked about the impacts of these allegations in other areas, including their financial situation, mental health and well-being, physical health, attendance and performance at work, feeling of safety, relationship with a new partner, relationship with members of the extended family, relationships with friends, reputation in the community, and confidence in the justice system. Most women reported that the allegations had had impacts in all these areas:

- Mental health and well-being (841, 98.2%);
- Feeling of safety (838, 97.9%);
- Confidence in the justice system (828, 96.7%);
- Physical health (825, 96.4%);
- Attendance and performance at work (801, 93.6%);
- Financial situation (744, 87%);
- Reputation in the community (690, 80.6%);
- Relationship with members of the extended family (684, 79.9%);
- Relationship with friends (670, 78.3%);
- Relationship with a new partner (630, 73.6%).

In addition, the participants were asked about the impact of the allegations on the child’s mental health and well-being, physical health, attendance and performance at school, feeling of safety, relationship with siblings, relationship with members of the father’s extended family, relationship with members of the mother’s extended family, relationships with friends, and confidence in the justice system. Most women considered that the allegations had affected several areas of the child’s life:

- Mental health and well-being (777, 90.8%);
- Feeling of safety (762, 89%);
- Physical health (695, 81.3%);
- Attendance and performance at school (660, 77.1%);
- Relationship with friends (573, 66.9%);
- Confidence in the justice system (554, 64.7%);
- Relationship with members of the father’s extended family (522, 61%);
- Relationship with members of the mother’s extended family (509, 59.5%);
- Relationship with siblings (452, 52.9%).

6. Challenging the “Parental Alienation” Allegations

The majority of the women (768, 89.7%) had faced difficulties when trying to challenge the “parental alienation” allegations. When asked about the specific difficulties that they had faced³, the most frequent difficulties were related to professionals involved in child

³ They had to select one or more items in the following list: 1) Professionals who made recommendations and decisions in child custody/residence or child protection proceedings did not acknowledge the father’s violent and abusive behaviors and their impacts; 2) Professionals who made recommendations and decisions in child custody/residence or child protection proceedings did not conduct an adequate safety

custody and child protection proceedings. The following difficulties were identified by at least 50% of the respondents:

- Professionals did not acknowledge the father's violent and abusive behaviours and their impacts (662, 86.2%);
- Professionals did not conduct an adequate safety assessment (584, 76%);
- Professionals did not listen to the child's wishes and feelings (527, 68.6%);
- Participants did not have access to an expert or a professional with a good understanding of violence and abuse to conduct an evaluation or write a report (424, 55.2%);
- Participants had limited access to financial resources which impacted their ability to challenge these allegations (390, 50.8%).

The participants were also asked about the support that had been available to help them challenge these allegations⁴. In this regard, the women had had limited access to formal support. The following sources of support were identified by more than 30% of the participants:

- Their own lawyer (501, 58.5%);
- Their friends (459, 53.6%);
- Their psychologist, psychiatrist, or mental health professional (398, 46.5%);
- Their extended family (378, 44.2%);

- Domestic violence or shelter workers (308, 36%).

Several women considered that they had been unsuccessful in both accessing support and challenging the allegations. Indeed, almost half of the respondents (379, 44.5%) reported that they had not been able to access support, and slightly more than half of the respondents (458, 53.7%) reported that they had been unsuccessful in challenging allegations of "parental alienation". Only 25% of women (213) reported that they had been successful in challenging these allegations.

7. Conclusion

This report presented preliminary findings from an international survey on "parental alienation" and domestic violence, conducted with 911 participants in the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The research findings raise serious concerns regarding the recourse to "parental alienation" discourses in child custody and child protection proceedings, particularly in cases involving domestic violence as well as child physical and sexual abuse. In many cases, women and children had disclosed the father's violent and abusive behaviours to professionals and had reported it to the police.

The research findings reveal that, in most cases, the fathers or the fathers' lawyers had been the first to describe the women as

assessment; 3) Professionals who made recommendations and decisions in child custody/residence or child protection proceedings did not listen to the child's wishes and feelings; 4) No access to legal information or legal advice; 5) No access to a lawyer to represent me during these proceedings; 6) No access to an expert or a professional with a good understanding of violence and abuse to conduct an evaluation or write a report; 7) Limited access to financial resources; and 8) Other difficulties.

⁴ They had to select one or more items in the following list: 1) Woman's own lawyer; 2) Child's lawyer or guardian; 3) Judge; 4) Expert or professional who conducted an evaluation or wrote a report on the family dynamic or on custody/residence evaluation; 4) Child protection worker or child protection lawyer; 5) Woman's own psychologist, psychiatrist or mental health professional; 6) Child's psychologist, psychiatrist or mental health professional; 7) Domestic violence or shelter worker; 8) Criminal or public prosecutor; 9) NGO or community association; 10) Doctor/general practitioner; 11) Police officer; 12) Extended family; 13) Friends; 14) Child's school or daycare staff; 15) Politician; 16) Journalist; 17) Academics; 18) Network on social media; 19) Religious groups; and 20) Others.

“alienating” mothers. In most cases, these allegations had been made after concerns had been raised regarding the fathers’ violent and abusive behaviors. These findings suggest that labelling abused women as “alienating” mothers can be a tactic used by the perpetrators to divert attention away from their own violent and abusive behaviours.

Finally, the findings highlight the multiple impacts of these allegations on both women and children, and the difficulties that they face when trying to access support and challenge these allegations.