

# Implications for men of separation from their children due to emergency protective measure

Implicações para homens do afastamento do(a) filho(a) devido medida protetiva de urgência  
Impacto en los hombres del distanciamiento del(la) hijo(a) debido a medida protectora de urgência

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To unveil the implications for men of father-son estrangement as a result of a protective measure for conjugal violence.

**Methods:** This is an exploratory descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, developed with nine men who were responding to a lawsuit for conjugal violence at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Courts of Justice of the Peace in Casa de Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The research took place through a semi-structured interview, with its content recorded, transcribed and then submitted for validation by the men. Data were systematized based on the steps recommended by the categorical thematic content analysis.

**Results:** The study reveals that the father-son estrangement as a result of an emergency protective measure causes paternal bond rupture, promoting the development of psycho-emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, often somatized and expressed from headache to conditions that require hospital care.

**Conclusion:** The commitment to the exercise of paternity also violates the right of children and adolescents to live with their father figure. Thus, there is a great need for the Brazilian National Policy for Comprehensive Care for Men's Health to include a management that prioritizes preventive actions against violence as well as providing psychosocial support to men.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Desvelar as implicações para os homens do afastamento pai-filho(a) em decorrência de medida protetiva por violência conjugal.

**Métodos:** Estudo descritivo exploratório, abordagem qualitativa, desenvolvido com nove homens que respondiam a processo judicial por violência conjugal junto às 1<sup>a</sup> e 2<sup>a</sup> Varas de Justiça pela Paz em Casa de Salvador, Bahia, Brasil. A pesquisa ocorreu por meio da entrevista semiestruturada, tendo seu conteúdo gravado, transcrito e, em seguida, submetido à validação pelos homens. Os dados foram sistematizados com base nos passos preconizados pela análise de conteúdo temática categorial.

**Resultados:** O estudo revela que o afastamento pai-filho em decorrência da medida protetiva de urgência suscita no rompimento do vínculo paterno, fomentando o desenvolvimento de problemas psicoemocionais, como ansiedade, depressão e ideação suicida, muitas vezes somatizados e expressos desde cefaleia até condições que necessitam de cuidados hospitalares.

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Conflicts of interest: nothing to declare.

**Conclusão:** O comprometimento do exercício da paternidade viola também o direito de crianças e adolescentes ao convívio com a figura paterna. Deste modo, há grande necessidade de que a Política Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde dos Homens contemple uma gestão que priorize ações preventivas para a violência, assim como desempenhe acompanhamento psicossocial aos homens.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Revelar el impacto en los hombres del distanciamiento padre-hijo(a) como consecuencia de medidas protectoras por violencia conyugal.

**Métodos:** Estudio descriptivo exploratorio, enfoque cualitativo, llevado a cabo con nueve hombres que respondían a juicio por violencia conyugal en el 1º y 2º Juzgado de Justicia por la Paz en Casa de Salvador, estado de Bahia, Brasil. La investigación se realizó a través de encuesta semiestructurada, con grabación y transcripción del contenido, y luego sometido a su validación por los hombres. Los datos fueron sistematizados con base en los pasos preconizados por el análisis de contenido temático de la categoría.

**Resultados:** El estudio revela que el distanciamiento padre-hijo como consecuencia de medidas protectoras de urgencia provoca la ruptura del vínculo paterno y fomenta el desarrollo de problemas psicoemocionales, como ansiedad, depresión e ideación suicida, muchas veces somatizados y expresados desde una cefalea hasta condiciones que necesitan cuidados hospitalarios.

**Conclusión:** El comprometimiento del ejercicio de la paternidad también viola el derecho de niños y adolescentes a convivir con la figura paterna. De este modo, hay una gran necesidad de que la Política Nacional de Atención Integral a la Salud de los Hombres contemple una gestión que establezca prioridades en acciones preventivas contra la violencia, así como también realice un seguimiento psicossocial de los hombres.

## Introduction

Gender stereotypes, which naturalize practices anchored in beliefs and values of what it is to be male, contribute to men taking less care of themselves and exposing themselves to risky situations,<sup>(1)</sup> such as violence. Although commonly related to the victimization of the female population, violence against women harms men, such as the father-child separation, which can be an important element in the process of resignification of men about the marital relationship.<sup>(1)</sup>

Anchored in the social construction of women and men, a different behavior between genders is historically expected. In Bourdieu's understanding,<sup>(2)</sup> each gender is constituted as a socially differentiated body from the opposite gender,<sup>(2)</sup> not being related to the biological sex. Thus, a woman is expected to be sensitive, fragile and harmless<sup>(3)</sup>; a man is expected to be strong, assertive, virile, courageous and to constantly prove his masculinity through aggressive or risky behaviors.<sup>(4)</sup> These attributes and characteristics tend to be perceived as natural and permeate the entire process of formation of female and male identity.

Although a priori the constructs of being a man refer to the notion of superiority, it is worth reflecting on their impacts on men's health and life. The social construction establishes that men cannot express their emotions and feelings, because they are not allowed to show weakness,<sup>(5)</sup> although,

in the face of unemployment, they need to maintain the role of provider and head of the family.<sup>(6)</sup> Additionally, the construct of imposing man's power over women directs them to not know how to deal with the female decision to end the relationship, as they construct that the decision should be made by men. According to PAHO,<sup>(7)</sup> the male population has shown a tendency to premature mortality, which is correlated with behavioral patterns, such as the lack of search for medical and psychological care and a tendency to violence.

In the meantime, violence against women stands out, a phenomenon of high magnitude and complexity. Regarding the data, worldwide, about one third of women experience domestic violence<sup>(8)</sup>, and in Brazil, each year, more than 1.3 million cases of aggression against women committed by partners or former intimate partners are reported<sup>(9)</sup> and 4,519 women were murdered.<sup>(10)</sup> These numbers reflect the reality of structural inequality to which women are subjected and which constantly put them at risk of being assaulted and even murdered by men.

Although mostly practiced by men, conjugal violence, inserted in violence against women, also constitutes a harmful event for men. Brazilian research points out that this aggravation, above all, the experience of imprisonment, can trigger men's physical and psychological illness, in addition to raising social stigma, financial difficulties and family disintegration by separation from their chil-

dren.<sup>(11)</sup> The father-child separation occurs often as a result of protective measure, which determines the separation of men in favor of an offended's safety, and may include restriction or suspension of visits to minor dependents<sup>(12,13)</sup> and consequently hindering/ making it impossible the exercise of paternity.

It should be noted that paternity is experienced in the father-child relationship from the affective bond between them, which must remain even after a marital dissolution.<sup>(14)</sup> A national study points out the importance of the father figure in a child's development and the transgenerational aspect of paternal absence and its losses, such as difficulties in establishing bonds and low self-esteem and confidence in oneself.<sup>(15)</sup> The relationship with the father is also related to the discovery of psychological and emotional resources, such as assertive decision-making and construction of the concept of limits.<sup>(16)</sup> At the international level, a North American research corroborates that the absence of the father or not/little participation of the father is related to antisocial behavior<sup>(17)</sup>, and research conducted in the United Kingdom with 192 parents shows the impact of father-child interaction for children's cognitive development.<sup>(18)</sup> It is therefore indicated that the father-child relationship, as long as it is not toxic, is of paramount importance for child development.

Considering the importance of the exercise of paternity and, paradoxically, the right to female protection in the context of conjugal violence, which can result in a protective measure and consequent father-child separation, the study aimed to reveal the implications for men of father-son separation as a result of a protective measure for conjugal violence.

## Methods

This is an exploratory descriptive study with a qualitative approach,<sup>(19)</sup> linked to a matrix project entitled "*Enfrentamento da violência conjugal no âmbito do Sistema Único de Saúde: Tecnologia social envolvendo mulheres, homens e profissionais da atenção básica*", funded by the Research Support Foundation

(FAPESB - *Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia*). The research met the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ).<sup>(20)</sup>

The study was conducted with nine men who, during the research, responded to lawsuits for domestic violence in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Courts of Justice of the Peace in Casa de Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Fathers responding to a lawsuit for conjugal violence in the aforementioned courts, with children with an ex-partner who is under a protective measure with suspension of visits to underage dependents, in stable psycho-emotional conditions for the interview were included. Five men who did not attend the interviews after two consecutive appointments were excluded, and there was no refusal to participate.

The process of approaching participants occurred from the insertion of the main researcher in the Reflective Men Group (RMG). It is worth noting that the male participation in RMG occurs by judicial determination, with a view to complying with the provisions of Art. 35, item V of Law 11.340/06.

After the end of RMG, the men were contacted by telephone and invited to take part in the study. They were clarified about the objectives, right to participate or not in the research, as well as to withdraw at any time, anonymity and confidentiality of information. After consent, the interviews were scheduled beforehand, only upon the signing of the Informed Consent Form. For greater preservation of their identities, an alphanumeric coding (M1,... M9) was used, in addition to other ethical precepts contained in Resolutions 466/12 and 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council (CNS - *Conselho Nacional de Saúde*).

Data collection took place between October and December 2019, through semi-structured interviews using a script for collection that contained questions related to sociodemographic aspects (age, religion, race/color, education, family income) and answered the guiding question: What are the implications of the separation of their children as a result of a protective measure due to marital violence? The interviews lasted about 40 minutes and were conducted in private spaces. The interview content was recorded and transcribed, then submitted for

validation by the men who participated in the research, to then be submitted to the procedures of data organization and analysis.

Data were systematized based on the categorical thematic content analysis proposed by Franco,<sup>(21)</sup> in which it guides content organization of the message identified in the text, allowing the emergence of categories. Thus, after text skimming, material exploration and data categorization, it was possible to organize the content. The feasibility of this stage was made possible by the use of NVIVO10, which favored the organization of qualitative data and the emergence of thematic categories.

It is worth noting that the research was approved in May 2018 by the Research Ethics Committee of the *Universidade Federal da Bahia*, under Opinion 2,639,224 and CAAE (*Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* - Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration) 88960217.6.0000.5531.

## Results

The study had the collaboration of nine men, aged 27 to 54 years, who had a monthly family income of two to eight minimum wages, self-declared black (8) and with higher education (6). The study reveals that parental leave reverberates in implications for men, namely:

### Paternal bond rupture

The men's discourses reveal that their separation from their children, due to protective measure, led to separation not only physical but also interrelational, since contact was not allowed, even visual or telephone. This situation impairs the quality of the relationship between father and son, compromising the exercise of paternity, weakening the affective bond and interfering in parental authority, as shown in the following statements:

*Due to the emergency protective measure, I was quickly separated from my son. I can't see him because I have to keep 500 meters away from him and my ex-wife [...] my son doesn't want to see me or talk to me on the phone anymore. The other day*

*I met him at the mall and, when he saw me, he ignored me. I think there is no more love from son to father. It's been over a year since I've been able to get close to him, give him a hug, play with him. [...] Despite my fights with her (mother), I was never a bad father, so I did not deserve to be away from him in this way (M10).*

*After I was forced to leave my son because of a protective measure, things changed a lot. Today, he does not obey me as before. [...] when he does something wrong, which I will call attention to, he ignores me and does not obey me. I also notice that he no longer feels like seeing me, talking to me, hugging me. (M3).*

### Psychological distress

Another aspect emerged from the men's discourse as an implication of father-child separation was mental distress. This was evidenced by feelings of uselessness, existential emptiness, low self-esteem, as well as signs such as loss of volition in the development of work activities and constant crying. In view of this, men started to present mixed cases of anxiety and depression, even presenting suicidal ideation.

*In the first months of absence, I felt a huge void, I felt useless for not being able to be the father I should be for my son. I cried constantly and lost the will to work. [...] my self-esteem became low, I became depressed (M8).*

*I'm very upset that I can't see my son. This gives me a feeling of constant anger and sadness. Some days I get very anxious; others, I feel very sad and spend all day crying. I even thought about suicide (M6).*

### Physical illness

The male narrative reveals that their children's distancing causes conditions that weaken the health of men, such as insomnia, headache, gastrointestinal problems, loss of appetite and hypertension. Thus, this situation negatively impacted men's physical integrity, even leading them to the need for hospitalization.

*Going through the whole criminal process is very bad, but being away from my son is the worst of all! [...] I lost my appetite and lost a lot of weight. He had severe headaches and stomach problems (H5).*

*[...] I missed my son so badly that I could not sleep properly. [...] I lost the desire to eat, my blood pressure changed, I was very weak, I was hospitalized for three days. I'm no more the same man as before! (M7)*

## Discussion

The study showed that the emergency protective measure interfered with the father-child relationship as a result of a distance in the paternal bond, having repercussions for men psychological and physical wise. Regarding the relationship rupture, the bond is the link that sustains family relationships and, when it comes to father-child, it begins to be built from the involvement of men in pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>(22)</sup> This relational bond is expressed through reciprocal care as well as physical, emotional and affective contact.<sup>(23)</sup> It can be inferred, therefore, that the bond is constituted by investing in a relationship that is strengthened through physical and emotional contact between those involved.

If, on the one hand, the family bond is of paramount importance for the parental relationship, its absence has been causing harm. One of these losses revealed in the speeches of the men participating in this study refers to loss of affectivity of their children for them. This same reality is reaffirmed in a study carried out in Minas Gerais, from workshops on parenting, which revealed that the conduct and behavior of fathers involved in a lawsuit causes conflicts and rupture in the affective bond between father-son.<sup>(24)</sup>

Moreover, another harm resulting from the father-child bond absence or rupture perceived from the study is the loss of the relationship of obedience and respect. This situation may be linked to the fact that children of fathers in lawsuits for violence may not recognize that the father figure may be represented by the functions of care and affection.<sup>(25)</sup>

Through this situation, it is possible that men have the feeling of losing the identity of a father, since there was a discontinuity in their position of authority in relation to their children. Culturally, the father figure represents authority, responsible for internalization of laws, moral norms and social values.<sup>(26)</sup> This social representation is related to the model of hegemonic masculinity that is expressed by most men. This adopts the premise that power is intrinsic to the masculine and must be protected and sought, being its supreme authority in the family relationship.<sup>(27)</sup> Therefore, it is possible to affirm that this situation brings to men a feeling of devaluation.

Another implication of father-child separation due to protective measures refers to mental distress, which, among other situations, may be related to bond rupture. Such male suffering is expressed from signs and symptoms, such as constant crying, low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness clinical manifestations suggestive of common mental disorder (CMD), which includes depression and anxiety.<sup>(28)</sup> Researchers and the Brazilian Psychiatric Association point to the existence of a correlation between depression and suicide, with suicidal ideation being pointed out as a symptom of depression.<sup>(29,30)</sup> Thus, it is evident that the mental distress experienced by these men can trigger more serious processes, such as suicidal behavior.

In addition to mental distress, the study also revealed, as an implication of father-child separation, physical body distress, expressed through clinical signs reported by the men participating in this research, such as insomnia, headache and gastrointestinal problems. Physical illness may, therefore, become a psychosomatic manifestation of negative feelings, as pointed out by a study carried out with men who have experienced imprisonment due to marital violence, somatizing the experience lived through signs and symptoms such as inappetence, gastrointestinal problems, hypertension and headache.<sup>(11)</sup> International researchers reinforce psychosomatic illness, with the triggering of varied symptoms, such as insomnia, loss of appetite and hypertension, in addition to signs of anxiety and depression.<sup>(31)</sup>

Given this scenario of men's physical and mental illness, which generates costs on the country's economic productivity, in addition to modifying family dynamics and bringing distress, it is necessary to manage male health care that addresses domestic violence issues. Considering that such illness is caused by conflicting marital relationships, this care should understand the subject in his biopsychosocial context, encompassing not only the physical body, but all its nuances.<sup>(1)</sup>

In this context, it is important to mention the Brazilian National Policy for Comprehensive Care for Men's Health (*Política Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde dos Homens, criada no Brasil*), created in Brazil in 2009, which presents as one of its thematic axes "Fatherhood and Care", understanding that this aspect, based on the paradigm of caring fatherhood, is of paramount importance for actions to encourage being a father, the formation of healthy family bonds, the encouragement of self-care and the care of others.<sup>(32)</sup> It should be noted that this axis lists activities to be developed within the scope of Primary Health Care (PHC), level of care ordered by subjects' point of view in their uniqueness within their social context.<sup>(33)</sup> This axis can contribute to qualifying actions aimed at comprehensive care for men, a proposal that has already been used in the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde*) so that care is holistic, effective and humanized, bringing better results to patients.<sup>(34)</sup>

In addition to the health sector, such actions can be offered in other spheres of care, as governed by Article 8 of the *Maria da Penha* Law, such as areas of public security, social assistance, education, work and housing.<sup>(35)</sup> In this regard, there is an urgent need for greater intersectoral articulation for developing actions to prevent domestic violence. Successful experiences focused on the health and education sectors highlight that education and health activities with the promotion of a culture of peace, carried out in the *Programa Saúde na Escola* (PSE - Health at School Program) with young people and in the *Sábado do Homem* (Men's Saturday) program with adult men, showed that this type of intervention has positive impacts on the family context.<sup>(36,37)</sup>

When it comes to situations of domestic violence, in addition to coercive practices, educational actions are also relevant. In this sense, the *Maria da Penha* Law advocates in its Article 22 the mandatory attendance of men to recovery and re-education programs as well as psychosocial assistance services.<sup>(35)</sup> Allied to this, in its Article 30, it provides that Domestic and Family Violence against Women Courts offer gender re-education, guidance, referral and prevention services for perpetrators of violence.<sup>(35)</sup>

A national study developed with 44 men in lawsuits who participated in a reflective group showed that, in their perception, participation in spaces for reflection and discussion about family relationships from a gender perspective makes it possible to see their violent attitudes and formulate strategies for a harmonious conjugal life.<sup>(38)</sup> It is inferred, therefore, that spaces that sensitize men about the consequences of conjugal violence are essential for the transformation process of marital and parental relationships.

The research is limited in that it does not address the father-child relationship prior to the legal process for marital violence and health of these men, nor to reveal the impacts of this separation for children's lives.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that the father-child separation due to an emergency protective measure raises the paternal bond rupture, fostering the development of psycho-emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, often somatized and expressed from headache to conditions that require hospital care. Such situations, which compromise the exercise of paternity, also violate the right of children and adolescents to live with the father figure, which must be based on affectivity and harmony. Given the clear implications of domestic violence against women for men's life and health, this study warns of the need for the Brazilian National Policy for Comprehensive Care for Men's Health to contemplate a management that prioritizes preventive actions of this type of violence. The study provides subsidies to rethink about conjugal interactions and

their implications. Therefore, there is an urgent need for spaces for reflection aimed at resignifying the male being and his social and affective function in the relationship as women and children.

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## Collaborations

Oliveira MAS, Estrela FM, Gomes NP, Santos JRL, Santos JD, Silva AF, Pereira A and Mauricio MD contributed to study design, data analysis and interpretation, article writing, relevant critical review of intellectual content and approval of the final version to be published.

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