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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by International Alliance of Women, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 May 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

International Alliance of Women comments on the report of Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem A7HRC/53/36 Custody, violence against women and violence against children

The need to shed light on the situation of women in highly contentious divorce contexts and to recommend action by the UN is unmistakable. We regret that this report falls short in its good intentions.

Before we present our detailed explanations, we would like to draw your attention to the 2022 publication by Dr. Jennifer Jill Harman: “This paper is the largest systematic review of scientific research on Parental Alienation published through 2020. Over 213 articles were identified that contained empirical data about Parental Alienation, published in 10 languages. Over 40% of what is known today about Parental Alienation has been published since 2016, and it is no longer tenable to claim that there is not enough scientific research on the topic to recognize it as a serious problem affecting millions of families.”

Too much emphasis is placed in this report on the method of Parental Alienation as a pretextual reason leading to life tragedy for women who have been falsely victimised. We do not deny that the cases cited have deprived innocent mothers of children, custody, the meaning of life. However, the portrayal of Parental Alienation as a pseudo-theory does not do justice to everyday life. We must recognise that children are alienated from one parent by manipulative behaviour of the other parent. Parental Alienation is a perfidious way of exerting psychological violence specifically on one parent with the collateral damage that the child is also harmed without initially being aware of it.

The former tradition in some cultures of children being automatically awarded to mothers after parental separation provided opportunities for some mothers to withhold children from the father for no reason and to alienate them through manipulative behaviour. This is a practice that we, as feminists, reject, because we stand for gender equality and focus on the healthy egalitarian upbringing of children. It is with horror that we realise that gender equality is happening in a negative sense, as more and more women come forward to say that they are losing contact with their children because fathers are being manipulative in order to alienate the children. We cannot prove a correlation with the increasing number of fathers taking care of their children; there would have to be more research and studies on this. In any case, it cannot be denied that after a separation, the children are no longer automatically awarded to the mother; increasingly, fathers are also taking on the role of the caring parent.

Parental Alienation does not happen overnight. It is not gender-specific. It can be driven by either parent, regardless of the caregiving role. For example, it is driven by the caregiver parent by telling the child that the other parent is no longer in touch, or has cancelled the visitation appointment, and is portrayed as irresponsible and unloving. The possibility of contact with the visiting parent is restricted, alternative programmes are imposed, or the parent is simply forbidden. The possibilities are so manifold that we can only describe a few here. We must also point out the other variation of Parental Alienation, in which the visiting parent displays manipulative behaviour and thus leverages the care parent out of his or her position. It is possible to use the advantageous position of the generous, easy-going holiday parent to make the child believe that the custodial parent is too strict, incapable of parenting, unfair ... and to promise the child the moon if he or she moves in with him or her. In this case, the alienation is completed when the child has changed residence.

Any conflicts of loyalty that may arise in the child are often confronted with emotional blackmail and it may be encouraged to take the side of the parent who is perceived to need them more.

Often, solutions for such developments are sought in a family court. Here the manipulating parent practically gets carte blanche, because the fact that the child is in their care gives them the position of the stronger one. It is striking when it is a father: due to the reversal of roles, a caring father enjoys a higher social standing and receives more recognition than a caring

mother, so they are given more credence when they claim in a manipulative manner, even before official bodies (child and youth welfare offices, in court), that the child no longer wants to have contact with the mother at their own request. Principles and financial aspects of the legal system (the lawyer has to represent the client's interests) lose focus on the best interests of the child. Inexperience in the psychology of a family system does not enable decision-makers (e.g. judges in family courts) to recognise the Parental Alienation method. A parent who is kept away from the common child by the other parent suffers a high psychological burden that hinders him/her socially and professionally as well as impacting mental and physical health. Illness, under-performance, financial losses are the consequences. Thus weakened, they are also not adequate sparring partners in a family court and are defeated. It is to be wished that the courts would think of the Caucasian Chalk Circle or Solomon's Judgement when a parent is seen to resign. Often, it is a renunciation of the child in order to enable it to continue living at all. In this case, the courts often behave too naively by banishing a parent from the child's life with the argument "the child should be allowed to rest". The assumption that the situation will resolve itself without outside help does not pertain in cases of Parental Alienation.

Alienating parents, whether fathers or mothers, exhibit certain malignant or pathological behaviours that should be illuminated or, even better, treated - possibly also under the aspect of their own childhood and relationship with their parents. Definitely, alienating parents are selfish and short-sighted in their desire to satisfy their own needs, and sacrifice the mental health of their children for the sake of their own fulfilment. Alienated children are like half-orphans, only worse, because they are brought up to believe that a parent is a bad person, bad for them, does not love them and cannot care for them. Along with grief for the loss, rejection is fuelled. Ambivalent feelings do not favour psychologically stable development; moreover, the rejection of a parent is equivalent to the rejection of half of oneself.

The consequences for the children are severe. They not only have a broken family and no access to a parent, they also grow up with the imprint that manipulative behaviour is tolerated and legitimate, and that in difficult situations, refusal is the solution without alternative. It can be observed that these children are poorly socialised and have behavioural problems, are often school dropouts and disoriented. They are either in outpatient or inpatient psychological treatment, whereby the issue of alienation is not addressed: the alienating parent will be reluctant to address the behaviour, the child or adolescent, who has already been manipulated against the alienated parent, will not open up in short-term therapy sessions out of fear and shame. Therapies fail because the real reason for the children's suffering is not recognised. As long as Parental Alienation is denied and does not find its way into psychological and therapeutic practices, only the symptoms are worked on without addressing the cause. The possibility of linking the conspicuous behaviour of children/adolescents who live with only one parent and refuse to live with the other parent to Parental Alienation must be maintained. Parental Alienation does not have to be the only cause of behavioural problems, but it can play a massive role. Denial of Parental Alienation not only takes away the perception and dignity of all those affected, it also takes away the possibility of social and medical rehabilitation.

We are eager to see further scientific research in this area that will put perceived truths to the test. The claim that Parental Alienation is a pseudo-theory with no scientific basis seems arbitrary. The thought leader in this field has fallen into disfavour, he is being dismantled 20 years after his death and the rejection is passed on to the current researchers in the field by not believing them. This approach is unworthy of the current state of human development; bias and prejudice have no place in the 21st century. Denying the method of Parental Alienation deprives scientists of the financial basis to continue researching the topic in order to arrive at results of general acceptance.

Our summary is:

1. Parental Alienation exists and is not gender specific.

2. Parental Alienation is not an on-off state, intermediate states often make it difficult to realise.
3. Parental Alienation is the exercise of psychological violence on the alienated parent and ultimately on the child.
4. Parental Alienation is socially harmful.
5. Parental Alienation needs further scientific research.
6. Parental Alienation must be made known in such a way that it enables helpers to act in both directions. It must be possible to recognise and act more quickly both in the case of actual Parental Alienation and in the case of feigning Parental Alienation.

Specifically, we recommend the following approach:

1. Parental Alienation must not be labelled as a pseudo-theory without scientific basis.
2. Denial of the Parental Alienation method denies above all the fates of all those affected: estranged mothers, fathers, family members, friends and worst of all children.
3. Helping systems need to gain knowledge about this "parenting method" to be able to act.
4. The reality of those affected must not be denied. The cases of complaint must be worked through with sensitive and trained people/helper systems in order to illuminate the situation in the individual case and to get to the truth.
5. The results of the individual case investigations must be scientifically processed. A justified re- inclusion in ICD-11 would be a clear signal and would enable further help.
6. Help must be given to those affected, ultimately all those involved are in a psychological emergency. The best prerequisite for this would be readmission to ICD-11.
7. Recognising the status quo must lead to preventive behaviour: In separation situations great attention must be paid to the best interests of the child. This requires qualified trained personnel/helper systems, as this PA method is so absurd that a sane person cannot even imagine that a child has to grow up in such an environment. The best interests of the child are not the same as the will of the child, especially if the child has already been manipulated.
8. Another preventive measure against Parental Alienation is to look at the relationship situation before the separation. Psychological violence is not visible on the outside; it must be given as much attention as physical violence.
9. To what extent mediation, behavioural or family therapies can help keep both parents accessible for children in such a situation must be examined .
10. So-called "reunification camps" strive under psychological guidance to achieve a rapprochement with the other parent in cases of alienation.

In conclusion, we do not understand why some groups are so reluctant to acknowledge the existence of Parental Alienation. Denying evidential situations is almost like claiming that the earth is a flat.

We trust in the clear thinking of the participants at the 53rd session of the Human Rights Council and appeal for the report to be recognised only in a revised/amended form to acknowledge the existence and harm of Parental Alienation.

Alison Brown

1 Harman, J. J., Warshak, R. A., Lorandos, D., & Florian, M. J. (2022). Developmental psychology and the scientific status of Parental Alienation. *Developmental Psychology*, 58(10), 1887–1911.