

Dutch Working group complex divorces – multidisciplinary collaboration. (CSMS)

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## World Health Organization rightly rejects the theory of parental alienation

## A theory that discriminates women in complex divorces

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The World Health Organization has decided that 'parental alienation' will not be included in the eleventh version of the ICD, an internationally used list of disorders, including mental and behavioral disorders. This is important news for victims of domestic violence who find themselves in a complex divorce. Domestic violence is one of the main causes of a complex divorce. Perpetrators of domestic violence find it difficult to accept when their partner leaves them and try to maintain control over the ex and children, often with an increase in violence, stalking and lawsuits. However, victims, especially mothers and children, are often disbelieved in a divorce context because of the theory of parental alienation.

According to the theory of parental alienation, after a divorce, a parent could brainwash the child by conducting a hate campaign against the other parent. As a result, the child would falsely reject the other parent and would even start to belief it was maltreated or sexually abused by that parent. In reality, there are parents who speak badly about each other after a divorce, but this is usually mutual and children are not brainwashed because of this. In fact, children often blame their parents.

That the theory nevertheless receives so much attention and seems to be almost universally accepted worldwide, is because it fits well with stereotypes and is strongly promoted by a worldwide lobby of the theory. People would rather believe in the vengeful mother who, after a divorce, does everything in her power to keep her ex out of the children's lives, than acknowledge that there are children who are maltreated or sexually abused by their father. This tendency to disbelieve and cling to prejudice also exists among many family judges and professionals at child protection services, who receive very little education in domestic violence and do not receive active anti-prejudice training as standard. Although mothers can also accuse fathers of parental alienation, studies in several countries show that mainly mothers are accused and that fathers are more likely to 'win' trials with these accusations than the other way around. As a result, children may be entrusted to fathers who mistreat/abuse them and sometimes these fathers may even be given sole custody.

The group of lobbyists for the theory of parental alienation originated from father rights movements. Later, others joined in, such as developers of divorce programs who earn money from parents in complex divorces and parents who lose contact with their child (sometimes wrongly) for very different reasons. This lobby always tries to get the theory recognized by official organizations and often wrongly suggests that the theory is already recognized. For example, many lobbyists reported that the World Health Organization recognized the theory when the term was temporarily included in the index of *search terms* on the website.

Earlier, the lobby drew a blank when they tried to get parental alienation included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), an American handbook that serves as a standard in psychiatric diagnostics in most countries. Now the World Health Organization has also decided that the term will not be included in the ICD, which stands for International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized organization of the United Nations focused on health.

For victims of domestic violence, there is hope that prejudices about parental alienation will be stopped. There is a large group of people who speak out and fight for domestic violence to be believed and for it to become a

determining factor in custody decisions after a divorce. They collectively signed an international memo of concern to the WHO after the lobby submitted an official proposal to include parental alienation. The signatories were international academics, domestic violence experts, research institutes, child development and abuse experts, and networks and children's rights associations. Many countries have also signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). This Convention is not yet sufficiently respected, but the Council of Europe has established independent monitoring and several countries have already been alerted to the need for action to ensure that custody decisions are made that effectively protect children when their father has committed domestic violence.

Information about the scientific studies that contradict the theory of parental alienation can be found on our website: <a href="https://csmsqroep.wordpress.com">https://csmsqroep.wordpress.com</a>

More information about the Istanbul convention:

https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention

The reference to the international collective memo of concern to the World Health Organisation: Neilson, L.C., Meier, J., Sheehy, E., Jackson, M., Halperin-Kaddari, R., Boyd, S. Jaffe, P., Lapierre, S. (2019). Collective Memo of Concern to: World Health Organization. <a href="http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/docs/WHO-September-24-2019.pdf">http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/docs/WHO-September-24-2019.pdf</a>