

The Hague Mothers Duluth Wheel is a tool co-created by FiLiA Hague Mothers, survivors and professionals to reflect the specific forms of coercive control and abuse experienced by mothers involved in Hague Convention proceedings. Each segment of the wheel captures a tactic used against mothers to intimidate, isolate, or undermine them through international legal systems. Below is an explanation of each segment with supporting insights and quotes from mothers and professionals.

## Underpinning the wheel: Patriarchal International Systems and Institutions

State collusion and patriarchy underpin all forms of abuse in Hague-related cases.

### Quotes:

*'Specific kinds of intimidation and all the other tactics in Hague situations rely on the fact that the state is not doing its duty to protect women.'*

*'This is something where the state holds control of the woman through those powers.' 'The failure to act and aspects of the state like courts, police—all these systems—are involved.' 'It's more than a segment, it colors everything else.'*

## Intimidation and Threats

This segment highlights how abusers use fear and manipulation to assert power. Tactics include threats to use the Hague Convention to take the children, intimidating legal claims, threats based on immigration status, and emotional blackmail. The fear of losing their children or being disbelieved intensifies the control perpetrators hold over mothers.

### Quotes:

*'It's that overarching threat of losing the children.'*

*'There's very often—I've heard it from so many mothers—the whole sort of the perpetrator saying, 'Nobody's going to believe you anyway. Nobody's going to listen. Nobody wants to hear from you.' And it's true.'*

*'What they use to intimidate mothers is actually true. Like when they say that 'the child will be brought back to me,' that's actually true.'*

*'There's also the threat of isolating you from your support system, family, and friends.'*

## Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse manifests through psychological manipulation, gaslighting, and trauma perpetuated by both the court system and abusers (CPIT - Court and Perpetrator Induced Trauma<sup>1</sup>). Survivors report being labeled as unstable or unfit mothers, mocked

in court, and constantly forced to defend their parenting despite their caregiving roles. Legal abuse compounds this, creating cycles of retraumatization.

### Quotes:

*'The emotional abuse continues through the court, your trauma is minimised, belittled and ignored.' 'The undermining, discrediting, the kind of making out that she's the bad parent, she's the crazy one.'*

*'Children come into emotional abuse play—saying, I'm going to make you look crazy, you're going to lose custody.'*

*'Making her feel badly for herself, making her think she's crazy.'*

## Isolation

Survivors of Hague-related abuse often experience intense isolation at multiple levels. This can include self-isolation out of fear that any actions (such as seeking therapy or support) may be used against them in court. Many women feel blamed or shamed for 'losing' their children, compounding the emotional distress. Physical and legal isolation is common, especially for mothers who are forced to remain in or return to a foreign country where they lack social and legal support systems. Language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and a lack of resources create further barriers. This isolation is often heightened after a Hague return, where mothers may be criminalized and stigmatized.

### Quotes:

*'As a first step, even before the abuser has to say a word or do anything, just forcing the move in itself is isolation.'*

*'If you're not familiar with the country, you don't even know who to ask'*

*'Using language to isolate—if he cuts it off, she has nothing'*

## Using Children

In many Hague cases, abusers manipulate children to exert control over mothers. This includes using

the child as leverage, undermining the mother's legal agency, or threatening complete separation. Even when mothers act in the best interest of their children, they are often punished or framed as 'alienating' the child from the father. Courts sometimes ignore or downplay reports of abuse, causing further trauma. Children's identities and emotional well-being are deeply impacted.

#### Quotes:

*'Your child is used as this pawn... while being dangled in front of you'*

*'It remains with them for life. It's going to affect every relationship they have as adults.' 'It's not our children, it's my children—the line is too far for abusers'*

### Male Privilege

Legal systems frequently uphold gendered double standards. Fathers are often granted the benefit of the doubt, requiring little more than declarations of interest to be taken seriously, while mothers must extensively 'prove' their fitness. Mental health diagnoses, trauma responses, or prior dependency are often weaponized against mothers. This judicial bias disadvantages women across the board, and particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

#### Quotes:

*'To me, that seems like one of the biggest things—just being believed (...) you just have to show up and say, 'I'm a good father now.' And that's it. That's the privilege.'*

*'She's been feeding them for years, but he shows up and is a qualified parent.'*

*'Demonization of women is extreme compared to what men are allowed'*

*'Women's viva voce testimony is treated as though it's not evidence.'*

*'Mothers are left to defend themselves and their children, while the man just has to say, 'I want another chance.'*

*'The father does not have to defend himself, his behaviour or the abuse.'*

### Economic Abuse

Hague proceedings create a severe financial imbalance between mothers and their abusers. While perpetrators may access state-funded legal aid and retain control of shared assets, mothers often bear the full cost of legal, translation, and psychological reports. This economic coercion includes housing insecurity, child support evasion, and legal maneuvering to drain financial resources.

#### Quotes:

*'He's got the house, he's got the cars, he's got the bank accounts and savings accounts. She's in another country, very often with nothing.'*

*Hague mothers are forced into foreign countries where their access to finances is cut off.*

*'Cost of the process drains women's finances entirely.'*

*'Self-representation is increasing because women cannot afford lawyers'*

### Cultural and Community Identity

In many cases, the Hague process strips children of their identity. This includes loss of language, traditions, and access to the extended maternal family. Some children are forced to grow up in just one country with just one culture, when they have multifaceted cultural heritage. Courts often overlook the child's right to a full cultural identity, especially in cross-cultural families. These rulings disproportionately impact immigrant and minority mothers and reflect embedded racial and national biases.

#### Quotes:

*'There's racism in judgments about which country is 'better' for children.'*

*'Children lose access to home culture and traditions.'*

*'Each country thinks it does better than the rest.'*

### Legal Systems Abuse

Abusers exploit legal systems to maintain control. This includes filing multiple motions in different jurisdictions, manipulating legal timelines, and exhausting the mother's financial and emotional resources. Courts may ignore protective orders, dismiss abuse history, or force mothers into endless litigation. The legal system, rather than protecting survivors, is used as a tool for further coercion.

#### Quotes:

*'You are required to write in affidavits your life history of abuse, an extremely personal and traumatic account to justify why you fled with your children. These are completely ignored. The Hague proceedings feel like it just comes down to jurisdiction.'*

1 E. Dalgarno, E. Katz, S. Ayeb-Karlsson, A. Barnett, P. Motosi & A. Verma (14 Dec 2023): 'Swim, swim and die at the beach': family court and perpetrator induced trauma (CPIT) experiences of mothers in Brazil, Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, DOI: 10.1080/09649069.2023.2285136