



# Unresolved Trauma Fuelling Parental Alienation: A Social-Work Lens on Mental-Health, Equity and SDG Progress in South Africa

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## BACKGROUND

The issue of parental alienation has become critical given the rising divorce rate in South Africa. According to Statistics SA (2024), there were 22,230 divorces finalized in 2023/2024, a 10.1% increase from the previous year. Parental alienation (PA) occurs when a child unjustly rejects one parent due to the psychological manipulation by the other parent. This issue is increasingly recognised in South Africa as a form of emotional abuse. However, the deeper roots of unresolved trauma are often overlooked. This neglect hinders our ability to provide effective interventions and undermines progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (mental well-being), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 16 (peace and justice). Despite increasing focus on parental alienation, there is a notable gap in understanding how intergenerational trauma, socio-political histories, and systemic inequalities fuel these dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. Most current frameworks pathologize individuals without acknowledging the trauma narratives that drive their behaviour.

## PA SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Parental alienation in South Africa is deeply intertwined with intergenerational trauma from ongoing socio-political inequalities and limited access to mental health support, leaving children vulnerable without trauma-informed interventions.

## METHODOLOGY



## IMPLICATIONS FOR SDGS

- **SDG 3 – Good Health & Well-being:** Improves mental health, prevents long-term trauma.
- **SDG 5 – Gender Equality:** Promotes fair treatment of both parents, reduces bias.
- **SDG 16 – Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions:** Encourages conflict resolution and child protection, strengthening family justice systems.



## LESSON LEARNED

Trauma-informed approaches lead to **more effective interventions.**

Importance of **culturally sensitive practices** in South Africa.

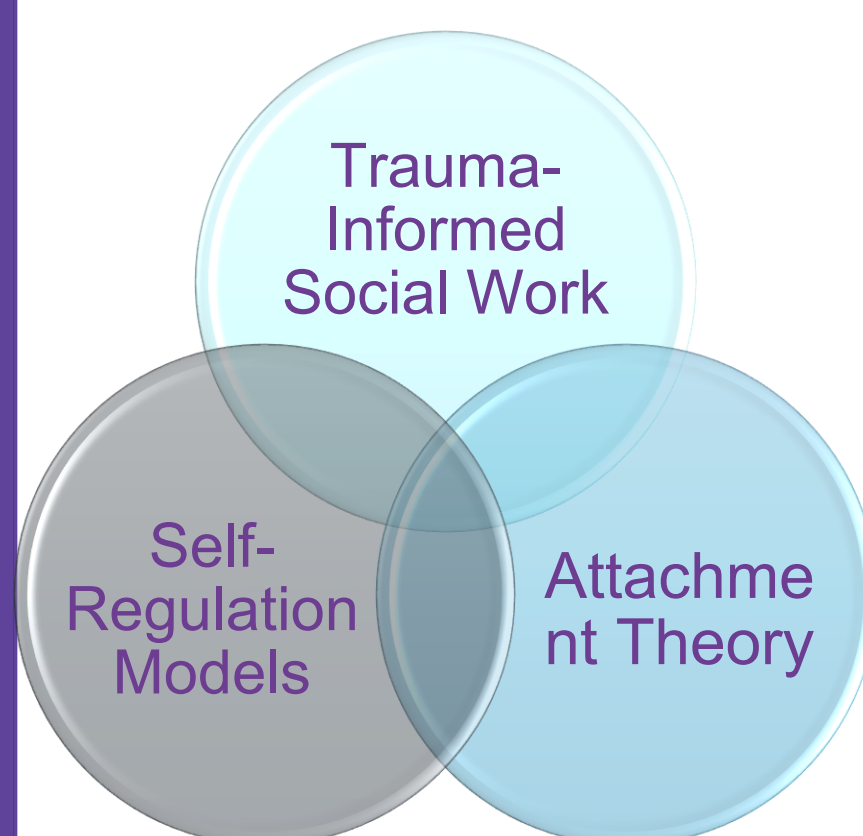
Collaboration between **social workers, legal professionals, and mental health experts** is essential.

Not all cases of parental alienation are a true reflection of parental alienation

Alienation does not necessarily happen between separated parents

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: KEY MODELS

- I. **Trauma-Informed response/ intervention**– Prioritises safety, trust, and empowerment.
- II. **Attachment Theory** – Focuses on repairing disrupted parent-child bonds.
- III. **Self-Regulation Models** – Teach coping strategies and conflict resolution to reduce emotional dysregulation.



## CONLUSSIONS

Parental alienation is a **trauma-driven issue**, not merely a pathological one.

Addressing it must involve culturally responsive, trauma-informed approaches aligned with SDG 3, SDG 5, and SDG 16. Trauma-informed, context-specific interventions are crucial in South Africa. Social work is positioned to lead in reshaping family justice systems toward healing and equity.

**Healing trauma is central to building healthier families and communities**

