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“What Surrogacy Does to the Child”

Good morning,

Thank you for inviting me here today.

And thank you for giving space to this discussion.

My name is Olivia Maurel, and I stand before you as the spokesperson of the Declaration of Casablanca.

But I also stand here as a feminist and an atheist, because the position I carry is not based on religion, ideology, or tradition.

It is based on human rights.

On lived experience.

And on the conviction that dignity does not belong to one worldview.

It belongs to every human being.

And before being an activist...

before speaking at the United Nations, the European Parliament, or before lawmakers across the world...

I am first and foremost a child born through surrogacy.

And I think it is important to begin there.

Because today, when people speak about surrogacy, they usually speak about adults.

Adults who suffer infertility.

Adults who dream of becoming parents.

Adults who desperately want a child.

But very rarely do we hear from the child.

The child exists at the centre of the process... yet somehow remains absent from the conversation.

I am here today because I believe that absence matters.

And because the Netherlands is now standing at a turning point.

You are debating whether surrogacy can be made ethical, transparent, careful, and safe.

You are trying to distinguish commercial surrogacy from so-called altruistic surrogacy.

And I understand the intention behind that.

I truly do.

Because nobody wants exploitation.

Nobody wants trafficking.

Nobody wants women abused.

Nobody wants children sold.

But what I want to ask today is something deeper:

What if the problem is not only the abuses surrounding surrogacy?

What if the problem is surrogacy itself?

I Speak Not Only For Myself

Today, I speak not only for myself.

I speak as the spokesperson of the Declaration of Casablanca, an international coalition bringing together more than 150 experts from across the world from 75 different countries:

- lawyers,
- psychologists,
- physicians,
- philosophers,
- feminists,

- former politicians,
- child-rights advocates,
- survivors of surrogacy,
- and women who have themselves acted as surrogate mothers.

And what makes this movement unique is that we do not all think alike politically, actually if we were to speak of any other subjects we would surely disagree on almost everything.

Some are left-wing.

Some are conservative.

Some are religious.

Others, like me, are atheists.

Some are feminists from Latin America.

Others are legal scholars from Europe or Africa.

But despite all our differences, we arrived at the same conclusion:

Human dignity cannot coexist with the commercialization — or contractual organization — of human reproduction.

Over the past years, the Declaration of Casablanca has intervened at:

- the United Nations in Geneva and New York,
- the European Parliament,
- national parliaments across Europe and Latin America,
- legal institutions,
- bioethics councils,
- and human-rights forums.

Not because we are trying to impose morality.

But because we believe something fundamental is happening in our civilization:

For the first time in history, **motherhood itself is becoming fragmented, outsourced, and transformed into a global market.**

And history teaches us something important:

Whenever human beings become markets, the vulnerable always pay the price first.

Women's bodies.

Children's identities.

The poor.

The voiceless.

That is why the Declaration of Casablanca calls not for regulation...

but for **abolition**.

Because we do not believe a human being should ever be conceived within a framework **where separation from their mother is planned in advance**.

And this matters enormously in the Dutch debate.

Because the proposed law here does not merely regulate surrogacy.

It normalizes the principle that a child can ethically be conceived with the intention of being separated from the woman who gives birth to them.

And once a society accepts that principle...

everything changes.

I Was Bought Before I Was Born

I was bought before I was born.

That sentence may sound brutal, but it is the truth of my existence.

I am a child born through surrogacy.

I didn't arrive in this world as someone's daughter.

I arrived as someone's **expectation**:

- the fulfilment of a contract,
- the completion of a purchase.

When I was born, I was immediately taken away from the woman who had carried me for nine months.

The only person I knew.

The only heartbeat I recognized.

The woman whose body had been **my first home**, whose **blood had been my nourishment**, whose **voice had spoken to me without ever making a sound**, was forced to hand me to strangers.

There was no skin-to-skin contact.

No moment of recognition.

No first embrace.

My story began with silence.

With distance.

With loss.

For most of my childhood and adulthood, I carried that loss without understanding it.

No one ever told me the raw truth.

Instead, I was wrapped in a beautiful narrative:
one full of smiles and reassurances.

I was told I was born out of love.

I was told I was wanted.

I was told I was lucky.

But love does not come with paperwork.

Love does not require money.

And love does not begin with the separation of a mother and her newborn child.

And yes — I know that sentence makes people uncomfortable.

Because many people involved in surrogacy genuinely believe they are acting with love.

And I do not doubt their sincerity.

But a child can be loved and wounded at the same time.

Those two realities can coexist.

The Questions That Haunted Me

As I grew older, the questions began.

Who am I?

Where do I come from?

Why do I feel incomplete?

These were not abstract philosophical questions.

They were survival questions.

Because **identity is not a luxury**.

It is the foundation of the human person.

But my foundation had been fractured before I could even speak.

As a child, I remember feeling something I could never explain.

I used to look at my commissioning mother, the woman who raised me, and feel guilty because something inside me felt disconnected (she looked a lot older than the other mothers at school, we didn't look alike...).

I wanted to feel what other children seemed to feel naturally.

That instinctive sense of belonging.

But instead there was always this invisible emotional distance I could not name.

And when you are a child, you assume the problem must be you.

So I spent years trying to become "better."

Better daughter.

Better teenager.

Better person.

Because maybe then, I thought, that the emptiness would disappear.

But it never did.

My foundations had been stolen from me. My origins had been erased. My truth had been hidden. I was expected to build a life on missing pieces, and buildings without foundations eventually collapse.

And I did collapse.

The pain I could not name became anger.

The emptiness I could not explain became addiction.

Drugs numbed the ache. Alcohol blurred the questions. And when nothing worked anymore, darkness entered.

There were moments where I did not want to exist, moments in which I tried to take my life. Because how do you hold onto life when the story of your life has been built on a wound?

And yet here I stand.

Not because the system protected me.

But because I fought my way through the consequences of it.

Children Are Loyal

There is something people do not understand about children.

Children are loyal.

Even wounded children remain loyal.

For years, I didn't fight the system that hurt me.

Because admitting the truth felt unbearable.

If surrogacy hurt me...

What did it mean for the adults around me?

So instead of questioning the system...

I questioned myself.

And that is what many children do:
they internalize the wound.

And for a long time, I believed maybe I was simply broken.

Maybe I was too sensitive.

Maybe my experience was unique.

But then something happened.

I began speaking publicly.

And slowly, children born through surrogacy from around the world started contacting me privately.

Some were born in the United States.

Some in Canada.

Some in Europe.

Some through commercial arrangements.

Others through so-called altruistic surrogacy.

All of them had always known the truth about their birth.

But what shocked me most was this:

Despite our completely different lives...

the same emotional vocabulary kept returning.

Abandonment.

Disconnection.

Identity confusion.

Fear of rejection.

Loyalty conflict.

Different countries.

Different families.

Different childhoods.

Different political beliefs.

And yet the same wounds.

Because children born through surrogacy often feel trapped emotionally.

We love the people who raised us.

We do not want to hurt them.

We know many of them deeply wanted us.

And so speaking honestly about our pain can feel almost impossible.

Because the moment we express suffering, society immediately hears:

“You are attacking your parents.”

“You are ungrateful.”

“You are denying love.”

So many remain silent.

Not because they are not hurting.

But because they are terrified of losing the people they love. And rightfully so because I lost my parents when I started speaking out about surrogacy, it has been almost 3 years since we last spoke.

These children are terrified of becoming the “bad child” who ruins the happy narrative.

And I want people to understand something very important:

The surrogacy debate is often dominated by adults with power:

- agencies,
- lawyers,
- fertility clinics,
- intended parents,
- activists,
- political lobbyists.

But the children born through it are still very young historically.

Most are only now becoming adults.

Many are still trying to understand what happened to them emotionally.

Many are terrified to speak publicly.

And yet privately, the stories are often heartbreakingly similar.

Recently, a woman born through surrogacy, she is now 38 years old, sent a message to a group of us.

Not a political statement.

Just pain.

She wrote:

“Having a long time friend really trigger some abandonment stuff and am sitting in that coming up today...

It’s always so hard for me to figure out when I need to be careful with keeping around those who trigger these feelings vs when I need to work on my own shit vs some middle ground. Anyone else relate?”

And when I read that message, I thought:

This is what people do not see.

Not slogans.

Not ideology.

Not politics.

Just adults still carrying abandonment wounds decades later.

Adults born through surrogacy still trying to understand why certain relationships trigger panic, fear, insecurity, or emotional collapse.

Adults born through surrogacy still trying to untangle what belongs to ordinary life... and what belongs to the trauma of being separated from the woman who carried them before they could even speak.

And perhaps the most heartbreaking part is this:

Many of these people will never speak publicly.

Because they are afraid.

Afraid of losing their families.

Afraid of hurting their parents.

Afraid of the violence of public debate.

Afraid of being attacked or discredited.

So when people ask:

“Where are all the children speaking against surrogacy?”

I often think:

Maybe many are silent for the same reason traumatized children are often silent everywhere.

Because loyalty and fear can coexist with pain.

The Great Lie We Tell About Babies

One of the greatest myths surrounding surrogacy is the idea that newborn babies are blank slates.

That they do not know.

That they do not remember.

That they do not care who carried them.

Psychology and neuroscience now confirm what every newborn already knows: the bond between a baby and the woman who carried them is not sentimental, it is biological, hormonal, primal.

A baby is not an empty hard drive waiting to be programmed after birth.

A baby already has relationships before birth.

The womb is not a neutral container.

The womb is the child's first world.

The mother's **body** is the child's world.

The **sound of her heart** is the first language of safety.

During pregnancy:

- the baby recognizes the mother's voice,
- recognizes her smell,
- synchronizes biologically with her rhythms,
- adapts to her hormonal environment,
- experiences stress through her body,
- and begins forming attachment patterns already in utero.

The woman carrying the child is not simply "hosting" a fetus.

She is already mothering the child biologically.

And yet surrogacy requires something extraordinary.

It requires us to intentionally break that first bond.

Not accidentally.

Not because of tragedy.

Not because of war.

Not because of death.

But deliberately.

Contractually.

Planned in advance.

And this is exactly what the Dutch proposal would institutionalize.

A legal framework where courts approve, before conception, **the planned separation between a child and the woman who gives birth to them.**

Every surrogacy begins with a separation.

And every separation leaves a scar.

To break that bond deliberately, contractually, and then call it love is one of the greatest contradictions of our time.

Why I Believe Surrogacy Can Never Be Ethical

People often ask me:

“What if there is no money?”

“What if everyone consents?”

“What if the surrogate mother genuinely wants to help?”

“What if the arrangement is carefully regulated?”

“What if it is altruistic?”

And I understand those questions.

Because people want to believe there must be a way to make this ethical.

But after years of reflection — not only as a child born through surrogacy, but as a mother, an activist, and someone who speaks daily with other surrogate-born people — I arrived at a conclusion:

Surrogacy cannot become ethical because the central act remains the same.

A child is intentionally conceived to be separated from the woman who carried them.

That separation is not a side effect.

It is the objective.

Without the separation, there is no surrogacy.

And that means the ethical problem exists even in the most loving arrangement imaginable.

Because ethics is not only about adult **intention.**

It is also about what we ask the child to endure.

You can regulate payments.

You can regulate contracts.

You can regulate agencies.

You can regulate counselling.

But you **cannot regulate** away the biological reality that a newborn child already knows the woman who carried them.

You cannot regulate away **the rupture.**

You cannot regulate away **the loss.**

And that is why I do not believe there is such a thing as “ethical surrogacy.”

Not because all the adults involved are bad people.

But because the structure itself asks society to normalize something a child experiences as abandonment.

And I think this is the great blind spot of the Dutch proposal.

The proposal attempts to regulate the conditions of separation.

But it never questions the separation itself.

It asks:

“How can we organize surrogacy more safely?”

Instead of asking:

“Should a child ever be intentionally conceived for separation in the first place?”

And that distinction changes everything.

Surrogacy Circumvents The Protections That Exist In Adoption

And there is another reality that deeply worries me.

In adoption, societies recognize that separating a child from their mother is something profoundly serious.

That is why adoption systems, at least in principle, involve safeguards.

There are investigations.

Social workers.

Psychological evaluations.

Home studies.

Background checks.

Oversight.

Because society understands something fundamental:

Not everyone has an automatic right to receive a vulnerable child.

And yet surrogacy increasingly bypasses those safeguards entirely.

Today, in many parts of the world, almost anyone with enough money can obtain a child through surrogacy (talk about recent case in England – rape and human trafficking).

No equivalent adoption scrutiny.

No meaningful global oversight.

No serious international child-protection framework.

And I think we need to ask ourselves a very uncomfortable question:

Why are there often more protections when adopting an already existing vulnerable child...

than when creating a child specifically to be handed over through a contractual arrangement?

That contradiction should disturb all of us.

Because surrogacy has effectively created a parallel market that bypasses many of the ethical barriers societies developed around adoption.

And once reproduction becomes market-driven, inequalities inevitably enter.

Money enters.

Selection enters.

Consumer logic enters.

Demand enters.

And eventually, vulnerable women and children absorb the consequences.

This is why I believe the discussion in the Netherlands is much bigger than the Netherlands itself.

Because if a respected European democracy formally normalizes surrogacy through legal regulation...

it contributes to the global normalization of a reproductive industry that is already rapidly expanding across borders.

And history shows us something important:

Once markets involving human beings become normalized, they do not remain small, limited, or purely altruistic for very long.

They expand.

Always.

Because markets follow demand.

And reproductive markets are no exception.

Becoming A Mother Changed Everything

When I became a mother myself, something inside me shattered completely.

Because for the first time in my life...

I understood motherhood physically.

Not intellectually.

Physically.

I remember holding my baby against my chest and suddenly realizing:

The woman who carried me must also have felt this.

And for the first time, I stopped seeing surrogacy only through the eyes of the child.

I began seeing it through the eyes of the woman forced to give the child away.

And honestly...

I do not think humanity fully understands the violence of asking a mother to silence her own attachment in order to satisfy a contract.

When my babies were born, every instinct inside me wanted to protect them, hold them, smell them, stay close to them.

That bond is not ideology.

It is biology.

And suddenly I understood something terrifying:

The entire surrogacy system depends on denying that bond exists.

Because if society fully admitted how deep the maternal bond truly is...

surrogacy would become impossible to justify emotionally.

And so we use euphemisms.

Contracts.

Legal language.

Clinical vocabulary.

But underneath all of it...

there is still a newborn baby searching for the woman whose heartbeat they knew for nine months.

And there is still a mother trying not to love too much because she knows the child will be taken away.

That is the hidden reality of surrogacy.

Closing

This is not a debate about adults' wishes.

It is a defence of children's rights.

Children have rights:

rights to their identity,
their origins,
their dignity,
their mother.

Rights that can not be purchased, outsourced, transferred, or erased — not even with the best intentions. A child is a human being, not a project, not a possession, not a product. Adults do not have a right to children.

And remember, there is no international RIGHT to have a child, none. But children do have rights and we have to protect them at all costs.

And that is also why I wrote my book:

Où es-tu, maman ?

It is now available here in Dutch.

I did not write it only to tell my story.

I wrote it because I wanted people to understand what surrogacy truly is behind the beautiful language and marketing.

The book speaks about my life, my struggles, my search for identity and my trauma of separation. But it also gives tools to understand — and fight — the surrogacy industry itself.

Inside are testimonies, legal realities, industry mechanisms, and even real contract clauses that reveal how this system functions behind the scenes.

Because I believe people deserve to see not only the dream that is sold to them...

but also the human cost.

And so I want to end not as an activist...

but as the child I once was.

A little girl trying to understand why she felt abandoned before she could even speak.

A little girl wondering why the woman who carried her disappeared forever after birth.

A little girl trying to understand why her existence began with a contract.

People told me:

“You were created out of love.”

But I still carry the same question today:

If I was created out of love...

why was I separated from the woman who loved me first?

That question has followed me my entire life.

And perhaps the most important thing I can leave with you today is this:

Before voting for laws that normalize surrogacy in the Netherlands...

ask yourselves **whether the children created through those laws may one day ask the same question.**

Thank you.