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## EDITORIAL

### Rightfully considering fathers, their role, experiences and needs

Far from being invisible or absent as she may be in other areas of society (e.g. unequal pay or career opportunities) and in certain cultural contexts (e.g. family law provisions conveying unequal parental rights), the woman, and here the mother, whether biological or adoptive, has long been an integral part of the adoption triad. But what about the father? What do we know about the birth father who is to consent to the adoption of his child, and the impact that this choice has on his life? What do we know about the experience of the person who becomes a father through adoption or by other means (e.g. ART, surrogacy) or about the adoptee or the person with care-experience who becomes a father? Much is written about mothers' experience, but do we have the same extent of knowledge and testimonies from fathers? And what resources and support are available to them?

Through this editorial, ISS/IRC wishes to reflect on the progressive paradigm shift observed in contemporary family law including adoption procedures, which gives and will continue to give a greater place to the father(s). While long overdue, these reflections appear timely as they join the action points proposed in a recently published report to equalise practices around child care.

#### **The birth father: rightfully considered?**

For a long time, the birth mother was the only one to whom authorities turned when seeking consent for a child's adoption. Long-time absent from the scene, the father and his rights were only taken into consideration progressively over time, in order to be accompanied during the process of caring for his child and to make informed choices. Indeed, to suggest that biological fathers are evasive would not reflect the truth of many cases (see Monthly review n°180 of March April 2014). Situations might vary and range from: a mother who gives birth without the father being aware of; an extra conjugal relation leading to the refusal of the father to recognise paternity; the death of the mother and the father not having adequate support to take care of his child(ren); or to the falsification of the birth certificate and the omission of the father's identity to evade obtaining his consent, etc. (see Editorial, MR n°180 of March April 2014). Is it not time to question these circumstances more deeply? Is it not time to reflect on the consent of the father, whose recognition and exercise of paternity at

birth and beyond is more uncertain than that of the mother? Is it not time to sensitise professionals in providing counselling, guidance and support to birth fathers, especially if the latter express the desire to care for the child? Would such due consideration of the father not be necessary to correctly implement the subsidiarity principle and to affirm that all efforts were undertaken to prevent an unnecessary family separation? Is it not time to recognise the importance of the birth father, hence his active involvement in the adoption procedure (if possible), given the expressed desires and clear benefits for adoptees in search for origins processes? If no efforts of involving the birth father are made *ab initio*, what are the chances of an adoptee to find answers on their birth father, key part of their identity? In this sense, while few legislative texts address this issue, ISS/IRC encourages national legislators to explicitly include the birth father in the adoption procedure in order to give these men the possibility of being an integral part of their child's adoption process (see Fiji's Adoption Act 2020, which recognises several situations that can designate a father

in the framework of an adoption procedure). The only thing left to do would be to put the theory into practice through trained and informed professionals that accompany birth fathers in a sensitive manner.

### **Adoptive father and other forms of fatherhood: rightfully considered?**

Regarding the adoptive father, ISS/IRC had highlighted in Monthly Review No. 180 of March-April 2014 the difficulty for the latter in many contexts to find his rightful place and to exist as key figure in the adoption proceedings. Yet, having the necessary time to bond with the adoptive child, often a child with adverse/traumatic childhood experiences, is important not only for both adoptive parents but is key to setting the basis for a successful adoption. Has this situation changed in recent years? While, in Western countries, we can observe a movement towards equalising maternal and paternal rights in family law and in practice, does such trend also include paternal rights in adoption and child care (e.g. paid adoption leave or parental leave<sup>1</sup>)? Isn't such inclusive approach long overdue in the light of more and more States providing the possibility for single persons and same-sex couples to adopt domestically and internationally (see [The Guardian article](#))? Adoptive fatherhood in such contexts clearly triggers diverging opinions and is seen by many as controversial, but shouldn't these debates be seen as a great opportunity

“The study of adopted persons as parents could be one of the ultimate tests of adoption as a successful social intervention: in their transgenerational transmission of attachment, will the pre- or the post-adoption attachment experiences prevail in adopted person's parenting? Beyond attachment related issues, it would also be very interesting to see how adult adoptees reflect on the meaning of adoption as they traverse through various adult roles and have different life experiences.”

Source: Jesus Palacios & David Brodzinsky, 2010, Review: Adoption research: Trends, topics, outcomes. Available in [English](#).

to better understand what adoptive fatherhood is about and entails? What is adoptive children's experience with their adoptive fathers, whether

in same-sex or heterosexual couples, or even adoptions by single men? If we carefully listen to adoptees' testimonies, as in any family constellation, the adoptive father can take a crucial role in the adoptee's life; so why is such role then not or inadequately given credit in laws and policies? Additionally, fathers' experiences in raising an adoptive child are crucial to help shape preparatory and post-adoption services and support in order to cater to specific needs and circumstances that can only be beneficial to the concerned children. Could part of the answer to the above question lie in the fact that few fathers seem to come forward and share their

experiences, or are willing and comfortable to seek out for support in case of difficulties? Despite the scarce research available on fatherhood<sup>2</sup> and the child-father relationship<sup>3</sup>, similar testimonies are shared by other fathers such as step-fathers, foster fathers or even social fathers and intending fathers in the context of ART and surrogacy arrangements. In the era of more and more openness, some of these fathers mention indeed encountering difficulties and feeling discomfort, when required to talk to the child about their child's background, including conception and birth. Hence, one might wonder: might another explanation for their little consideration be linked with their own perception of their fatherhood, non-genetic in most of the above-mentioned situations?

### **Adoptees and care-experienced men as fathers: rightfully considered?**

Evidence and professionals have long pointed out how the environment influences our development and the formation of a person's personality. This is particularly true with regard to adoptees and care-experienced persons. Indeed, adoption and care-experience have a lifelong impact (see MR N°214 of 2017). One of the biggest life-altering moments is becoming a parent as it has an enormous impact on our psyche and always entails questions of coming into the world and of transmitting information, identity, culture etc. When someone has been abandoned or relinquished and then placed in alternative care or adoption, these questions remain the same, however there is a higher possibility of them remaining unanswered. What happens when an adoptee or a person who has spent some time in the alternative care system himself becomes a father? How do adopted/care-experienced adults adjust to parenthood? How do they cope with the turmoil of feelings that becoming a father entails? How will their past experiences affect their relationship with the newborn child? And how to talk to their own children or even grandchildren about their story and their origins? Like mothers, fathers can face challenges in adapting to the changes that a new-born normally brings into the family and couple's relationship. However, fathers may experience these feelings alone, as they may be reluctant to express them or they might believe – because of their past experiences – that others may minimize or dismiss them. Thus, this may have a negative impact on the attachment style with their own child. Luckily, paternity also has a restorative power, as it gives fathers a sense of purpose and achievement.

In many contexts, fathers remain still too invisible in laws, policy, practice and research. Yet, progress seems to be underway thanks to societal changes. Indeed, in the light of varying family structures, the diverse forms of fatherhood all require due consideration by trained and sensitised professionals that understand the diversity of experiences and are able to provide adequate and individualised support to equip and encourage fathers to exercise their role towards their child. In line with its new advocacy approach on providing a bigger platform for adoptees and the members of the adoption triad, ISS/IRC wishes to contribute via its Monthly reviews and an upcoming section dedicated to portraying different views, in encouraging fathers to share their stories.

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### References:

- <sup>1</sup> See pp. 16 and following to learn more about parental leave in the Nordic Countries, Nordic Council of Minister (2019). *State of Nordic Fathers*; See also, Barker, G., Garg, A., Heilman, B., van der Gaag, N., & Mehaffey, R. (2021). *State of the World's Fathers: Structural Solutions to Achieve Equality in Care Work*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US.
- <sup>2</sup> E.g. Coleman, J (2001) *Focus: young fathers*. *Young People's Health, Network Newsletter* 15:1; Deborah H. Siegel (2014), *Fathers in Adoption: Are They Forgotten?* *Social Work Today*, Vol. 14 No. 6 P. 14; Kowlessar, O, Fox, JR, Wittowski, A (2015) *The pregnant male: a meta-synthesis of first-time fathers' experiences of pregnancy*. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 33: 106–127. DOI: 10.1080/02646838.2014.970153; Kumar, SV, Oliffe, JL, Kelly, MT (2018) *Promoting Postpartum Mental Health in Fathers: Recommendations for Nurse Practitioners*. *American Journal of Men's Health* 12(2): 221–228. DOI: 10.1177/1557988317744712
- <sup>3</sup> E.g. Roberts, L (2017) *A small-scale qualitative scoping study into the experiences of looked after children and care leavers who are parents in Wales*. *Child & Family Social Work* 22(3): 1274–1282. DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12344; Weston, J (2013) *Care Leavers' experiences of being and becoming parents* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Hertfordshire, UK.