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The biased picture of intercountry adoption in the media

In order to better disseminate the ethical principles, which govern intercountry adoption and, thus, to rectify the biased news coverage of adoption in general, and even more so when celebrities are adopting, it would be useful for adoption professionals to appear more in the media.

Intercountry adoption is in fashion. The growing number of celebrities who take an interest in it is an undeniable sign. Mia Farrow, Sharon Stone, Meg Ryan, Calista Flockhart, Johnny Halliday in France, Isabel Pantoja in Spain, Angelina Jolie and more recently Madonna, whose initiative to adopt a young boy of 13 months in Malawi made the headlines in the media worldwide. The list of celebrities who have adopted is already long and will most probably grow further, according to the rumours circulating on the web.

Unfortunately, the media handling of these adoptions often projects a distorted image of this special family bond. The complexity of the procedures, the rigour of the process, the risks involved in adoption, the importance of the preparation of the child and his/her prospective parents and, in particular, the needs and rights of children are generally "forgotten" aspects of cases reported in the media. The latter prefer to present adoptions by celebrities as wonderfully simple and fast love stories, carefully concealing any critical considerations.

In this context, it is essential that adoption professionals take action to correct this image.

A feeling of injustice and discouragement

This biased picture, however, has an impact on the audience at large and on prospective adoptive parents in particular. For the latter, who have been faced with a much more subtle and complex reality, this discrepancy raises a feeling of injustice and discouragement, often further exacerbated by the media's double talk. Indeed, if adoption by celebrities is idealised, the reasoning is another when it comes to intercountry adoption by « ordinary men and women ». The news coverage that refers to them mainly focuses on the problem of endless waiting periods, which

prospective adoptive parents are subjected to, on the red tape they are faced with, « despite institutions in the countries of origin being full of children »...

Furthermore, when the media take an interest in children in countries of origin, they depict dramatic and biased situations. They show crowded and poverty-stricken institutions, without saying that the great majority of children placed in them are not orphans and not adoptable. They portray

countries ravaged by war, AIDS or a natural disaster, where children have lost their parents and are left to themselves, without mentioning the opportunities for family or traditional child care. Everyone remembers the tsunami, the pictures of children on their own and destitute, and the rush to adopt fuelled by these pictures.

Without explanations or setting issues into perspective, it is understandable that prospective adoptive parents are revolted by these pictures and wonder why their adoption procedures are so complicated when so many children just seem to be waiting for someone to provide them with a home and a family which loves them.

The basic principles of intercountry adoption

In this context, it is essential that adoption professionals take action to correct this image. It is their duty to appear more in order to explain to society that reality is different from that presented by the media. It is particularly necessary to remind them regularly that intercountry adoption is, above all, a child protection measure as enshrined in international texts, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whose basic principles must be respected in all adoption procedures, starting with the right of the child to grow up, as a priority, in his/her family of origin. In this spirit, it is important that professionals regularly reiterate that a child should not be adopted merely because his/her family is too poor to care for him/her. In this case, it is preferable to support the family of origin in order for the child to remain with his/her family (see Monthly Review N° 66). Equally, it is important to better explain the meaning of the principle of subsidiarity, according to which intercountry adoption must only be of last resort, if no suitable permanent and family solution could be found in the child's country.

As far as the countries of origin are concerned, it is also important to make it understandable to society in receiving countries that the majority of children placed in institutions are not adoptable, either because they still have a family, or because their legal or psychological

adoptability has not been determined. It is also a matter of making it understood that an increasing number of countries of origin are now able to control their birth-rate, to reduce poverty and to promote domestic adoption, and that they are therefore placing a decreasing number of children for intercountry adoption, *a fortiori*, healthy babies who are often adopted domestically.

If society understands these various issues, it will have a picture of adoption, which is much more in accordance with reality and will therefore accept that intercountry adoption will now involve much fewer babies and more older children, sibling groups, or disabled or sick children, for whom it is often difficult to find an adoptive family in the country of origin.

Efforts must be provided

These messages are certainly difficult to disseminate among the population, and carry little political weight in Western countries, where prospective adoptive parents are far too numerous in comparison with the number of opportunities for adoption. It is, however, essential that efforts are made in this regard, in order for the waiting periods and the plans of prospective adoptive parents to be better adapted to reality, and for the pressure on the countries of origin to be reduced. Such pressure is dangerous as it opens the door to all kinds of abuse, disregarding the best interests of the child.

From the perspective of a better dissemination of the principles set out above, and without expressing ourselves on the heart of the matter, the debate that is taking place in numerous media about the adoption of a young boy from Malawi by Madonna has at least had the benefit of initiating an important dialogue. But whatever progress is made in this dialogue, the specific preparation of the prospective adoptive parents obviously remains essential. In this framework, it would be useful if the media coverage of intercountry adoption could be addressed, in order to show applicants that reality is different to what is presented every day.

The ISS/IRC team