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EDITORIAL

Celebrity adoptions: for better or for worse?

With the growing number of celebrities adopting children, it is more than reasonable to ask whether the wealth, fame and publicity attached to such actions is helpful or harmful.

Given the concentrated attention to adoptions by Madonna, Johnny Hallyday, Angelina Jolie and many others, it is important to again outline the framework of ethical adoption practices as applicable also to celebrities, despite it not often being the case (see Monthly Review 11-12/2006). What is it about certain celebrities that allow for them to jump long waiting queues as well often skip evaluation or preparation courses? This editorial seeks to identify whether their wealth, fame and publicity have been used for their personal advantage and if so, whether these three elements are beneficial and/or detrimental.

Using wealth for what purchase

Prior to adopting in Malawi in 2006, Madonna stated that she planned to invest at least 3 million USD to support orphans in the country. Other celebrities have invested large sums into countries where they are planning to or have adopted children. At a first glance, such actions appear to be generous acts of charity for those living under impoverished conditions. Moreover it can not be denied that 'humanitarian aid' is necessary especially in developing countries. Many celebrities have used their economical power to help the least advantaged, with the best intentions, but sometimes without considering the potential consequences of their acts.

Whenever financial or other contributions are linked to an adoption, this can encourage the 'idea' that the country of origin should receive something in return for the adoption. This contributes to promoting an image of adoption that is linked with money. If the public becomes accustomed to the fact that money (and lots of it) is necessary to undertake an adoption, then, prospective adoptive parents will be less suspicious when they are asked to give money. This can also lead to the routine expectation that money will be handed over without knowing whom will be paid and who will actually benefit. Another reaction to adoptions being linked with wealth is to say that if you are rich, you can adopt which creates the idea that paying for an adoption is equivalent to paying for a child, leaving the latter as another fashion item.

When celebrities are able to jump long waiting queues and in some cases have laws interpreted in their favour, to adopt a child, it is reasonable to ask whether their wealth has been used in a very transparent way.

Using fame for what kind of role model

The popularity of celebrities is often effectively used to draw attention to worthy causes, which is why the example of Audrey Hepburn as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador will remain an admirable model of virtue in our minds. Likewise, when the well meaning objectives to help a child, as held by the great majority of celebrities are accompanied by ethical practices good role models in the adoption are created. When Nia Vardalos (My Big Fat Greek Wedding) adopted a child

under 5 years from foster care, she implicitly raised the public's awareness that there were 129 000 children in foster care waiting to be adopted in the USA.

However, when celebrities adopt children from precarious backgrounds to promote their own brand/image, one is left wondering what kind of model of behaviour is being created and some doubt can be raised about their motivations. Such cynicism is especially valid in the case of certain celebrities selling pictures of the adopted child to popular magazines, or adopting children from countries where the procedure remains notoriously unregulated. It can be even more problematic if other prospective adoptive parents are then encouraged to follow such actions. It is unfortunate when celebrities use their fame to create poor role models for those involved in adoptions.

Using publicity for what purpose

It has been said that Madonna has put Malawi on the map. Prior to Madonna's adoption activities in Malawi, many people had not even heard of the country, let alone its millions of orphans due to HIV/Aids etc. Unfortunately, the media's depiction of the countries where children are being adopted from is not always accurate, nor is it objective. When the media portrays the ravages of a war or natural disaster or the deplorable conditions of certain institutions, one could not be blamed for thinking that adoption is surely necessary for such children. It is this dramatic kind of reporting that helps perpetuate myths that there are millions of adoptable children amongst unaccompanied and separated children and those in institutions as discussed in the Monthly Review 10/2008. The media has a certain responsibility of what topics they give attention to and what information they spread. When celebrities adopt children, it appears that the worldwide publicity is used to sell newspapers etc and attract the world's attention to the celebrities' image.

Using wealth, fame and publicity for the best interest of the child

It is also important to ask whether the combination of wealth, fame and publicity is in the best interests of the individual child being adopted. Some celebrities will adopt children in a discrete manner such as Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Josephine Baker to protect the privacy of the family. Other celebrities allow the paparazzi to invade their homes and their children are subject to continuous worldwide publicity without having regard to the long term effects. In these cases, adoptions appear to be based more on personal desires and interests.

Using wealth, fame and publicity for a good cause

The ISS/IRC discourages the direct support of institutions, adoptions agencies and specific adoption systems by any prospective adoptive parents where the potential for compromises are rife. The wealth, fame and worldwide publicity of celebrities should be used completely outside the framework of the adoptions in countries where they intend or have undertaken an adoption.

The ISS/IRC believes that the wealth, fame and worldwide publicity of celebrities can be used for good causes. Celebrities can use their wealth to strengthen the overall child protection system in countries by supporting law reform projects and social worker training. Celebrities can use their fame to promote good role models of how to support least developed countries or adopt older children. Celebrities can use their worldwide publicity to encourage worldwide support for general fundraising projects for a country. It is clear that celebrities have a choice to use their adoption actions for better or for worse.

The ISS/IRC team
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Source: Looking beyond the comparatively limited prospects for finding notoriously high-in-demand, young, healthy white infants?
http://webcenters.netscape.compuserve.com/celebrity/becksmith.jsp?p=bsf_celebadoption