International Social Service
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General Secretariat • Secrétariat général • Secretariado General

International Reference Centre for the Rights of Children Deprived of their Family (ISS/IRC)

Monthly Review N° 9/2010 September 2010

EDITORIAL

Mothers of origin, those forgotten by intercountry adoption

This bulletin offers mothers of origin a special position, by highlighting their difficult experiences and opening up ways of thinking ahead by providing them high quality support.

If research on adopted children and the creation of the bond with the adoptive family are numerous, such is not the case for biological mothers of children. They are, however, the leading ladies in the process of adoption, since they are where it all begins. The recent publication of research on Ukrainian mothers has given us the chance to return to this critical and too often ignored question (see Ukrainian research on page 6).

Why such lack of approval and even ostracism?

A first response might be sought after in the perception of intercountry adoption itself: too simple a vision that only wants to see help for children in distress and which hides its origins in order to consciously or not, to reassure those adopting that the steps they have taken are correct. Certain recent enquiries have, in any case, largely contributed to changing this idealistic picture. Whether it involves the Terre des Hommes' report on Nepal, ABC News report on in Ethiopia and the case of Ruc children in Vietnam (Review 11-12/2008) when mothers are allowed to speak, their words convey only shame, unhappiness and tears.

Although these days, the legislative advances in this matter are worth noting since the Hague Convention of 1993, as well as numerous domestic legislation recognising the rights and the interests of these women – but now we can also ask about what happens in practice? Can one claim that a real choice is offered to these mothers to keep their child? What is at stake is the child's future and the meaning itself of any adoption, based on the mother's final decision, taken while she was well informed, with full understanding and free from pressure.

Easy preys…

Mothers of origin are at the heart of social and financial pressure. They are often easy preys of certain go-betweens, organised crime or adoption agencies. As for the latter, their role sometimes turns out to be (at least) ambiguous, especially when they are at the same time welcoming mothers of origin and placing their children for adoption. An obvious conflict of interest occurs particularly at the financial level: as the mothers feel themselves indebted to the institution which has made funds available to them which they are not able to reimburse; their consent could be obtained by deceit if they are illiterate, etc. These situations are unfortunately not unusual and result in life-long abusive and traumatic separations.

The responsibility of society and professionals

According to the countries where they live, mothers of origin must also suffer moral disapproval: coming from unfavourable socio-economic environments, they are subjected

to strong cultural, family, and religious pressures (for example by rejecting pregnancies that are out of wedlock). The way that society and professionals look at them is, consciously or not, largely accusatory and judgmental. How does one speak freely in such conditions? The responsibility weighs heavily on professionals who accompany these women and is therefore essential. A large part of their decision rests upon the professionalism, mulitidisciplinarity and human quality of the staff who surround them. The question arises as to the capacity of the latter to encourage these mothers to express their feelings freely in relation to the circumstances of their pregnancy as well as the fears that surround them and her possible rejection of the child. To encourage mothers to open their hearts can help them become the mother of a child whose existence she becomes aware of both at the physical and psychic levels and to resume their responsibility for his life plan whatever it may be. With that in mind a method of intervention based on specific criteria (for example the length of time they will be given assistance before, during and after the final decision; individual accompaniment, the implementation of basic and social rights such as access to housing, employment, nursery schools etc.) will allow them to respond to the mothers' needs at each stage of the programme of assistance by emphasising their own experiences and by taking into account how these evolve as the baby gradually becomes more real. Such is the challenge of the practice.

Towards a real place for mothers of origin in the decision making process?

The attentive observation of intercountry adoption shows how countries are becoming ever more aware of preventing abandonment by supporting mothers of origin as closely as possible to their needs and their reality, a principle clearly set out in the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care of Children (Section IV). Support programmes have been set up for example in Chile (where they create nurseries in schools and thereby encourage adolescent mothers not to give up their studies) and in Romania (see Review 5/2008). There are fewer support programmes provided from the outset of the mother's pregnancy.

Claiming to offer mothers of origin a real choice of keeping their child proves to be a delicate and complex task to which countries should continue to persevere. If this is the situation for mothers of origin, should we not also talk about fathers of origin, who are often quite absent from the discussion about intercountry adoption. What space could be kept for them in the process of decision making? A question that might inspire new research …

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September 2010