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EDITORIAL

Prejudices and cultural discrimination in adoption: Are they adequately addressed and talked about?

Whilst cultural prejudices and discrimination in adoption remain sensitive, complex and taboo aspects of the process, what is their impact on adoptees, biological and adoptive families, as well as other actors involved?

Intercountry adoption is an environment in which multi-culturalism and differing backgrounds are present. On the one hand, adoption professionals must address these aspects, for example, when assessing prospective adoptive parents (PAPs) through matching, and even when accrediting and/or authorising an adoption body (see p.4). Such activities are important to avoid any attitude or behaviour that may ultimately jeopardise the adoptees' wellbeing. On the other hand, we are all – as members of our societies – responsible for ensuring that adoptees do not suffer from any of these. Cultural issues are therefore inherent and cross-cutting aspects of intercountry adoption that deserve the attention of all.

Inter-cultural perspectives at the heart of intercountry adoption?

Historically, intercountry adoption has been prevalent in countries of origin facing poverty and socio-economic difficulties, conflicts and other development obstacles. Indeed, in these environments, intercountry adoption has been presented as a viable option for the protection of children. However, these countries often also have weak child protection frameworks including questionable adoption systems, with potential for irregular procedures and a general lack of respect for children's rights and adoption ethics.

Despite the latter, mostly well-intentioned PAPs – with the tacit agreement of some competent authorities, agencies, professionals and media in receiving countries – would generally ignore these concerns and remain convinced that this was always the best option for the child

irrespective of their family's situation and potential care options within the country, such as children's reintegration (see p.9).

These prejudices continue to play a crucial role in several stages of the intercountry adoption process and existing cultural tensions such as insufficient protection and care offered to unaccompanied and separated children (see Monthly Review No. 202 of May-June 2016) and the constant search for countries of origin for potential intercountry adoptions. Thus, these multi-cultural countries should benefit from the availability of awareness-raising tools and materials to respond to potential discriminatory situations/attitudes that may affect adoptees.

This approach may be similar in some countries of origin, where domestic PAPs would rather adopt abroad than a child from their country, from a particular ethnic or socio-economic background, in order to avoid any common prejudices within their society. This was the case, for instance, following the earthquake in Haiti, as some PAPs, reluctant to adopt a child of indigenous origins or with a disability within their country, rather sought to adopt a Haitian child, believing they were 'saving' them¹.

Breaking the taboo of cultural discrimination: May it be identified or addressed in the pre-adoptive phase?

Cultural prejudices are often not addressed at any stage of the adoption process, as there remains a certain taboo about even raising this issue. However, if one wants to avoid or at least reduce any future impact on the adoptees' wellbeing, then should this not be addressed

from the beginning of the proceedings, in particular in receiving countries? For example, when assessing PAPs, these are generally not explicitly asked about their potential prejudices with regards to some cultures, or the child's origins. However, if one wishes to undertake a meaningful and proper matching, should one not have such information in order to ensure that the latter truly responds to the child's needs, rights and characteristics and that the prospective adopters are indeed suitable potential parents? In this regard, in October 2015, in Belgium, the *Conseil supérieur de l'adoption* issued an opinion on the legitimacy of meeting the wishes of PAPs as to the child's ethnic origin or skin colour, and recommended that, when searching for a potential adoptive family, the child cannot be the object of discrimination based on his or her race, skin colour, descent or national or ethnic origin².

When not addressed in the assessment as such, should it not be focused on as part of the preparation process? For example, in Finland, the available preparation course includes specific sessions on racism and prejudices (see p. 5). Whilst not specifically excluding PAPs due to their views, it has the merit of offering a forum of discussion and a process of reflection on one's own prejudices, their impact on the adoption and their potential implications for the adoptee.

Awareness-raising in the process of integration of the child: Are adoptees sufficiently protected against discriminatory situations?

Whilst cultural prejudices and discrimination must be prevented prior to the adoption, there is no doubt that discriminatory actions, words and other cultural prejudices must also be avoided once in the receiving country, including at school, extended family and in society. This is, amongst others, a matter of providing specific support to adoptees faced with these situations (see p. 7) and train the psycho-social professionals who may be involved, in order to prepare and support all in responding to these (see p. 12).

Thus, at the ISS/IRC, we truly believe that the issue of cultural prejudices and discrimination should be explicitly addressed by all the actors prior to and after the child's adoption, i.e. when advocating for intercountry adoption in the media or by adoption agencies, when training professionals, when assessing and preparing PAPs, and when raising awareness and supporting adoptees during their integration in the adoptive – extended – family and receiving society. Whilst it remains a complex, sensitive and sometimes taboo subject, the adoptees are entitled to their protection and respect for their rights, which includes their psycho-social wellbeing and non-discrimination.

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