



Monthly Review

published by the International Reference Center for the
Rights of Children Deprived of their Family-ISS

No. 224

August 2018

'The happiness of any society begins with the well-being of the families that live in it'

Kofi Annan,

whom the ISS/IRC team wishes to pay tribute to

EDITORIAL

First names in adoption: A real issue?

The first name given to a child is integral to their identity, and reflects a part of their story, to a greater or lesser extent – depending, for example, on the age of the child. Changing it when they are adopted is therefore not a trivial issue, and is a cause for debate at several levels.

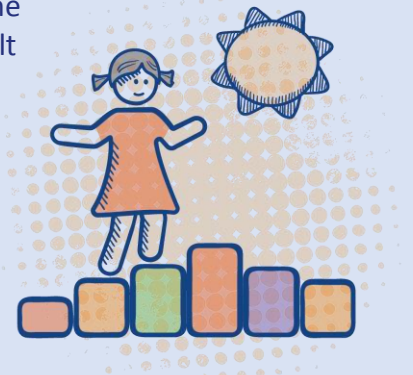
'Kamal becomes Ganesh, Gerry remains Gerry, Sophie chooses to be called Sarah, Phonsy becomes Sabine'¹. A child's first name clearly carries meaning. For a child in the process of adoption, the choice of first name may be influenced by a variety of elements, such as the adopted parents' wish to give them a new name or wish not to break with their past, the laws or culture of the country of origin, etc. Thus, how can we ensure that the interests of the child and the wishes of their adoptive – and even biological – parents are taken into account, when a change or not of the name is at stake.

Debate between – and within – States

Whether a first name can be changed only when there is a legitimate interest, or when there is simply a wish to do so, is its regulation not essential for the respect of children's rights? In the specific case of adoption, these provisions carry even greater significance, when the original first name is the only information the adoptee has of his or her origins (see p. 10). Although this often comes down to the personal choice of the adoptive parents, its impact on the child and their rights, especially if they are adopted at an older age, must be taken into consideration. In the absence of a legal framework, it seems difficult to ensure, for example, that the child's views have been taken into account when making this choice,

or that the adoptee might be able to reclaim their original name in the future, if they felt the need to do so (see p. 5).

In terms of International Law, Articles 3, 8.1 and 12 of the UNCRC, which enshrine the rights of children to preserve one's identity (including name) and to have one's views heard, seem to constitute a solid basis, which has to be supplemented by the cooperation enshrined in the 1993 Hague Convention. Indeed, whilst several countries regulate changes of first names with specific provisions applicable to adoption, some are silent on this matter (see p. 5). In cases of difficulties or conflicts of laws, should cooperation mechanisms not clearly state which country and authority is responsible for the process or identify the procedure to comply with? Indeed, it should be reminded that the issue of the child's name is an integral part of the adoption decision and that the absence of respect by countries of their respective obligations – see p. 5 – might be of such nature as to compromise the adoption.



Debates amongst professionals

The field of adoption is not immune to controversy and the expression of dogmatic beliefs, which complicate or even jeopardise what is supposed to be in 'the best interests of the child' (see Monthly Review No. 219, March 2018). The issue of first names in adoption is no exception. For example, some professionals promote a change first names, in order to help to 'graft' the child onto their new family and country. Conversely, others recommend retaining the first name, both in recognition of the child's past and to avoid a sharp 'break' between these stages of their life. However, do either of these positions provide a single solution for every child? Should the debate focus on whether or not the first name is changed, or rather on the way in which this is carried out? Once again, the role of the professionals appears to be to refocus the debate on the child and on the conveyance of their story by their adoptive parents, irrespective of the choices they make (see p. 11).

Debates amongst adoptive parents and biological parents

Should the adoptive family and professionals be granted complete freedom of choice in making this decision? What about the biological family, in particular in an open adoption? Changing the first name of a child in the process of adoption has as many implications as there are people involved. For biological families, changing the child's name may intensify the feelings of loss and separation; for adoptive parents, not being able to give their

child a name can also be experienced as a significant loss. This reflects the importance of addressing these different perspectives in each party's preparation and support, including mediation if necessary, to help them understand the significance of the child's name before and, if changed, after adoption.

Debate amongst adoptees

As for adoptees, the impact of a change of first name on their lives has as many responses as there are adoptees. As stated by Sitara Chamot in her article on page 10, there are multiple strategies for building an identity, and the choice of a first name plays an important role in developing these. The question must therefore be asked openly, and solutions considered creatively by adoptees and adoptive parents, with the understanding that there is a shared wish to name one's child. This is essential in the ongoing search for solutions that are increasingly tailored to the specific needs of each individual and each family.

Should the original first name of a child in the process of adoption be changed or should it be retained? The ISS/IRC, for which this is a real question, encourages those working in adoption to focus on the quality of support provided to all concerned persons so that, irrespective of the choice finally made, they can all develop and flourish, both individually and as a family.

The ISS/IRC team,
August 2018

