

Submission to Standing Committee on Family and Human Services**Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas**

ARMS (SA) Inc (Association Representing Mothers Separated from their Children by Adoption) takes this opportunity to comment on the current adoption practices and to introduce the voice of natural mothers into the debate over these practices.

Background

ARMS was established in 1982 as a self help group for women who had lost children to adoption. The self help component of ARMS remains but in addition over the last sixteen years State Government funding has enabled the agency to employ a part-time Counsellor and Administrative Assistant.

ARMS provides a range of services for its clients, including professional counselling, peer support, mediation and advocacy. ARMS also conducts community awareness programs to enhance the understanding of adoption loss within the general community.

It is now recognized and well researched that mothers suffer real and complex grief and loss as a result of losing their children to adoption. Similarly, adopted people experience grief that is compounded by society's expectation that they view adoption as a positive experience in their lives. The idealizing of adoption by simply focusing on the joy does not present the full picture of what adoption really means to those involved. In our experience as natural mothers we know that the joy of the adoptive parents is coupled with feelings of grief and loss, namely the grief and loss experienced by the natural mother and child through separation from each other and the grief and loss experienced by (most) infertile couples who cannot have their own biological child. These two conflicting emotions are very real but if only the "positive" one is allowed to be expressed those who experience these emotions will merely feel guilty for also feeling the "negative" emotions. This in turn just adds to the confusion and pain. The practice of adoption is associated with many emotions including grief and loss. Simply not talking about it does not mean that it is not there.

Terms of Reference**Inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions.**

ARMS is against the whole principle of adopting children from overseas as we do not believe adoption to be in the best interests of the child or the natural mother. In our research our attention has been drawn to the fact that only 48 of the 370 overseas adoptions in 2003-4 were from countries that have ratified the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (*Adoptions Australia 2003-4*).

We therefore question what safeguards are in place for the child in their country of origin as they enter the adoption process, no matter from which part of Australia an adoption request comes.

Inconsistencies between the benefits and entitlements provided to families with their own birth children and those provided to families who have adopted children from overseas.

A child brought up within his/her biological family in most circumstances will have the benefits of automatic access to their biological, familial and cultural heritage, surrounded by people who will look or act in a similar way to the child – encouraging a sense of familiarity and affirmation of the “self” which is important to the development of a child’s self esteem. Similarly the family medical history can be readily accessed, which may be vital for the healthy life of the child.

These are benefits and entitlements that we take for granted in a biological family.

An adopted child will have access to none of these – and in particular a child adopted from overseas will be removed from all the familiar aspects of their cultural heritage – the sights, sounds, smells, textures that are uniquely associated with that culture. This often happens at a pre-verbal stage in his/her functioning, when the affirmations of the senses are so important to a child’s development.

What are we doing psychologically to a child by removing them from all that they have known?

ARMS believes that the Government should examine its policies on overseas adoption vis-à-vis its policies on the adoption of Australian born children.

In relation to local, Australian born children, there is a recognition that the best environment for children to be raised in is within their own (biological) families. This is demonstrated by the fact that throughout Australia every attempt is made to dissuade parents seeking adoption of their Australian born children from signing adoption consent forms. It is clear that this policy is successful and many parents who initially seek adoption for their children change their minds and decide to raise their children themselves or with the support of their families.

This recognition that children are best raised within their own families seems to be completely forgotten however, in relation to overseas adoption, demonstrated by the fact that the number of children being adopted in Australia from overseas is steadily increasing.

Surely if adoption is not considered to be a good option for Australian born children, it is also not a good option for overseas born children?

At ARMS we are very aware of the impact of the adoption on the natural mother. We understand from our research and contact with people working within the field of adoption in other countries, that the situation in many of these countries is not unlike that experienced by natural mothers 20-50 years ago here in Australia, and which led

to the development of the government-sanctioned adoption practices of the 1960's and 1970's. These practices have since been condemned roundly by Government inquiries (see *NSW Adoption Inquiry 2000*). In the past there was a stigma attached to having a child "out of wedlock". Families often turned their back on young pregnant women as a result of this. There was no single parent pension or other means which offered support to the young mother to enable her to keep her child thus allowing her child to grow up with the benefits and entitlements of his/her familial and biological heritage. It is clear that these are major factors in many countries today that coerce mothers into placing their children to be adopted.

We provide some quotations from a book comprising letters written by mothers to their children whom they have lost to adoption. These letters could have been written any time in the last 80 odd years in Australia since adoption has been legalised. They are in fact quotes from this book, "*I wish for you a beautiful life*" edited by Sara Dorrow and published in 1999. They are letters from Korean natural mothers to their children who were adopted in America.

To my darling daughter. I don't know how I can express my feelings right now! My heart is torn apart because I could not keep you had to give you up for adoption. You may blame me, but with time I hope you will understand. I did not want to give you up but I had no choice. When I signed the waiver of parental rights I was in tears of great agony. I hope by reading this letter you will know how much I loved you and how I did not want to give you up.

And

I was not old enough to be pregnant, but I was ready to deliver my baby. What could I say when I met my baby? In a swirl of many words I was dispirited and I cried.

When the person who was in charge of my baby brought you and left you beside me, I cried again. Why did I give birth to you and then have to place you with others? I hated myself. And I hated the person who showed you to me only that one time. Just like that, we were separated.

And

Whenever I see children on the street, I go crazy. Everything weighs on my heart, and it hurts that I could not peacefully hold you nor lie down next to you – not even once

The increasing practice of adopting children from overseas is simply continuing the bad adoption practices of Australia 20 – 50 years ago.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many adopted people are adversely affected by their adoption experiences and that they are over represented in prisons, juvenile justice systems, amongst those with mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems, as well as those experiencing relationship difficulties. It is not unusual for professionals, such as school counselors, to attend adoption conferences. They want to learn about adoption because they have noticed a preponderance of adopted people amongst their clients. Similarly ARMS members' reunion experiences indicate that many adopted adults have or are experiencing some of the problems referred to above.

Just as we now recognize the hurt that resulted from past practices such as the removal of Aboriginal children from their community and the British Child Migrant Scheme, it is time for contemporary society to accept that the separation of children from their families, culture and country by adoption is harmful and should cease.

In the light of this, ARMS requests the promotion of individual and Government assistance and support to local agencies and organisations in developing countries to maintain children in need of care in their own communities rather than displacing them into foreign countries - so that they might enjoy some of the benefits and entitlements of growing up within an environment as close to their biological, familial and cultural heritage as possible.

July 2005

REFERENCES

Adoptions Australia 2003-4 Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, Canberra

Dorow, S. (1999). *I wish for you a beautiful life*. Yeong & Yeong Book Company, Minnesota

New South Wales Adoption Inquiry. (2000). "*Releasing the Past*", *Adoption Practices 1950-1998*. Parliamentary Paper Number 600. Sydney