



Submission to Standing Committee on Family and Human Services

Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas

Good afternoon Madam Chairman and panel members. Thank you for the opportunity to attend this public hearing of the Inquiry. My name is Meg Lewis and I am Chairperson of **ARMS (Association Representing Mothers Separated from their Children by Adoption (SA) Inc)** and with me is Maureen Craig, Deputy Chairperson, Pam Longley, a Life Member and staff member Deborah Whitelock. We would like to take this opportunity to address the committee in relation to the inconsistencies in adoption practices "benefits and entitlements", between adopted people and people who have not been separated from their family of origin and between parents of children who raise their children and parents who are separated from their children by adoption.

We sit before you as the voice of natural mothers and just as our voice was silenced by our guilt and shame 20, 30, 40 and more years ago, today we are again marginalized within the discussion of issues relating to adoption. We have enormous experience in adoption and yet our unique perspective is rarely sought and barely noted. There is wisdom in mothers who have experienced the unbearable pain of separation from their children by adoption – we have much to tell those who regard adoption as being a benevolent practice.

We want to draw your attention to information on the effects of adoption that is freely available from Government and non-government agencies which support our view that inter-country adoption is not a "cure" for displaced babies and children but rather a traumatic experience for children who often grow into traumatised adults.

The Adoption and Family Information Service (AFIS) (SA) website states that it is best for children to stay within their community, to be linked with extended family and financially supported to enable them to stay in their country of origin. The

site suggests donating money to support the needs of children and enable them to stay with their family and community. Sadly AFIS does not heed its own advice. Similarly, Children Youth and Family Services (SA) state that it is not in the best interests for children to be removed from their communities where they know their language and extended family.

The Queensland Government website recognizes that adoption is not in the best interest of the child, that whilst it may be well meaning in reality it "compounds the grief and trauma that they are experiencing". Post tsunami the Queensland Government advised people wishing to help to donate to registered child aid agencies to assist them to stay in their countries but not to remove them from their place of birth and potential reunification with family members. This advice is applicable to all well meaning people who (mistakenly) believe that adopting children into a wealthy, western culture automatically grants the child a better life.

UNICEF does not advocate adoption, stating that even if children need to be removed from their local community, inter country adoption is not advocated as an alternative. UNICEF recognizes that there are other factors involved in inter county adoption and the consequences are long term and irreversible. UNICEF advocates for the best interest of the child by asking people to assist agencies to work with the children in the local community. UNICEF sums up why Australians should not be adopting children from overseas: "Adoption overseas to an unrelated family, removal from their culture, language, customs and the communities they are familiar with will add to the loss these children have experienced".

PARC NSW website states that a survey in October 2002 identified the need by some workers for post adoption support, with respite care as a high priority need. They are talking about the need for RESPITE for goodness sake! What does this tell us about adoption if we are doing something to a child that means that in the future the child may need to be put into respite care? Departmental workers also

noted that, except where the adoptive parents inquired about searching for birth relatives, most calls to their service are from families in acute crises with adolescents.

I want to tell you about "Ling" as taken from the PARC NSW website

"Picture for a moment the world of a 12-month-old child living in a children's institution in China. She feels an immense longing, a yearning that is completely mysterious to her.... The home has familiar smells - a strange mixture of noodles cooking, disinfectant and human waste. She already understands the rhythms of Chinese language and music.

Suddenly a nurse takes off her familiar loose-fitting clothes, and dresses her in clothes, which fit her more closely. She is handed to a smiling woman whose skin is paler than she has ever seen. She is with another white alien face, smiling. She is terrified, cries loud and long. From here everything is unfamiliar compared to anything she's ever known, the sights, sounds, smells, pace of life. The pale-faced people want to hold her all the time. Why?! She screams, terrified by the plane journey. Where are they taking her?! her early deprivations will take some getting over".

Nancy Verrier, a world renowned author of "The Primal Wound, psychotherapist and adoptive mother writes that the primal wound occurs in all adoptions but that it is compounded in overseas adoptions by the added loss of culture and identity. It is vital that people understand the potentially huge impact that such a traumatic event can have on a child's psychological development and well-being. Verrier describes the neurological consequences of such a significant trauma early in life, which unconsciously influences emotional and physical reactions and behaviours, often causing anxiety and confusion.

Surely this is the greatest inconsistency of all, the right of a child to grow up within their family, within their own community with their true identity intact.

For decades researchers have been pointing out that separating babies from their natural mothers results in a wide range of emotional, psychological and physical problems for both mother and child. It would appear, however, that advocates of adoption and adoption workers do not read these books, or choose to ignore the evidence of problems in adoption. They neglected to read about it as early as 1943 when Florence Clothier wrote of the trauma suffered by the child separated from his mother. Ms Clothier noted, *The child who does not grow up with his own biological parents, who does not even know them or any one of their own blood, is an individual who has lost the thread of family continuity. A deep identification with our forebears, as experienced originally in the mother-child relationship, gives us our most fundamental security.*

In every decade since then researchers have pointed to the negative impact of adoption on both mother and child. The following studies have been cited in a paper by Wendy Jacob.

In 1952 a British psychiatrist coined the phrase 'genealogical bewilderment' ie lack of a definite relationship to one's genealogy, resulting for adopted children in:

- stunted emotional development
- irrational rebellion against their adoptive parents and the world as a whole; and,
- delinquency.

In 1953 it was reported in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry that adopted children manifested severe pathology including impulsive behaviours with characteristic aggressive acting out.

In 1955 it was stated that ignorance about their personal origins made adolescence more of a strain for adopted children than other children.

In 1964 a study noted that there is –

- substantial evidence from many sources that non-relative adopted children may be more prone to emotional difficulties; and
- there is more alcoholism, sexual acting out and more suicide attempts in adopted adults.

In 1966 it was noted that adopted people had serious adjustment problems in adolescence.

A paper in 1967 in the Australian Journal of Social Work, stated that there was a need for a national study of adoption. Unfortunately such a study never took place.

There is much anecdotal evidence that adopted adolescents and adults are over-represented in juvenile detention centres, psychiatric clinics, prisons and amongst the homeless on the streets of our cities, victims of alcoholism, drugs and abuse. However, there are no high level studies of the impact that separating babies and small children from their mothers, their extended families, their communities and their countries has on these children. Some years ago in South Australia the Offenders Aid & Rehabilitation Services of SA Inc sought to conduct research into the incidence of adopted persons in the South Australian prison system. The research was initiated because of their perception that adopted persons were over-represented in the prison system. Unfortunately, funding was not available and the research did not proceed.

There has been some research into suicide amongst adopted persons.

In 1988 a South African study of 82 adults aged 18 –70 who had been adopted as infants found that a high number of them had attempted suicide in adolescence.

A 1990 study conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis found that teenagers adopted as infants were more at risk of suicide than non-adopted youth.

A 1993 article in the Melbourne Age, written by Louise Bellamy, noted that Brother Alex McDonald, a Jesuit who had worked with homeless young people in St Kilda, said that of 147 suicides of young people caused by drugs and abuse in the area over the past decade, 142 came from adoption backgrounds.

In 1995 Betty Jean Lifton told a group of professionals and adoptive parents that there were no statistics on the number of adoptees who attempt suicide, or those who succeed, and that if there were, we might be surprised at the large number.

In 1998 an adoptive mother whose 23 year-old son committed suicide wrote to Women's Day wanting to hear from other parents who had lost an adopted child to suicide. She received 186 letters.

A 2001 study, found that attempted suicide is more common among adolescents who live with adoptive parents than among adolescents who live with biological parents.

Therefore to inquire into any inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes is to put the cart before the horse. There is a greater need for a national study on how adoption impacts adopted people. Let's put all adoptions on hold whilst such a study is carried out.

At a 1997 adoption conference in New Zealand, Anne Else spoke about looking at history in adoption education and healing. She warned:

"The past has left another legacy. The recent history of adoption, and in particular the brief era of a 'surplus supply' of babies, has led to a widespread expectation that **somehow, somewhere, it must be possible for those who want children to obtain them.** ... however, we cannot claim ignorance of the risks and pitfalls. I am constantly struck by the echoes of the past in practices currently being advocated: such as freeing up intercountry adoption..."

We believe that there is no automatic right to have a child. ARMS members bear testimony to the unbearable suffering of women who have lost children to adoption. Feminist Joss Shawyer speaks of adoption as a legal form of slavery suffered by infants who are stripped of their legal right to identity, including the loss of their entire genealogy through falsified birth records.

There are numerous striking similarities between the slave trade and intercountry adoption. Both practices are demand driven, utilising a highly advanced system of pricing and commodification of human beings with the young and healthy as the most valued... being dependent on the existence of intermediaries in the form of slave hunters and adoption agencies and a reliable transport system of ships and planes. Both the African slaves and the Third World children are stripped of their identities as they are separated from their parents and siblings, baptized and Christianized, lost their language and culture.

These are not my words. They are the words of a young Korean man, adopted as an infant into a Swedish family. Mr Hubinette's words may seem extreme to some but to those of us who for many years have witnessed and experienced the dark side of adoption we believe that only extreme language will penetrate the deep seated denial that surrounds adoption.

We believe that there is no humane way to separate a mother from her child or to avoid the ensuing grief she will experience. We have no reason to believe that the grief and loss associated with adoption is any different for mothers from developing countries than it is for us in Australia.

We believe that childless couples do not have the moral right to create a family with another woman's child. When the supply of babies from the young, the poor and those lacking social or financial support dried up in our society, adopters began looking to the young, the poor and those lacking in social and financial support in poorer countries.

In 2003, The Sydney Morning Herald reported that the new NSW Adoption Act prohibits a court from approving a change in a child's given name if the child is more than one year old, "unless there are special reasons, related to the best interests of the child". It reported the case of an adoptive couple who wanted to change the name of their two year old Korean born son. The judge stated that "adopted children, including children adopted from overseas, go through change and dislocation and disruption of everything in life that is familiar. Maintaining the child's name has some benefit in this disruption". The NSW Department of Community Services argued that the given name contributes to the child's sense of identity, including with his birth family. So I pose to you, why do we continue to accept the practice of allowing adopters to turn, as The Sydney Morning Herald said, "Ming into Kylie"?

Finally in response to the inquiry's term of reference relating to the inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions. All we can say is that we are ashamed that South Australia has placed more children from overseas for adoption per head of population than any other state. One "unsuccessful placement" is heartbreaking, that there were seven failed placements here in one year is a tragedy.

If adoption is really about putting the interests of children first, let's inquire into how adoption impacts on adopted persons and natural parents first.

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