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NEWSLETTER

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Transforming the Adoption Narrative: Empowering Adoptees & Adopting Inclusive Ways Forward

In this article, Ian Forber-Pratt, Deputy Executive Director at Children's Emergency Relief International (CERI), Adjunct Professor at the Brown School of Social Work, Washington University, and intercountry adoptee himself, explores the crucial evolution in the adoption sector, emphasizing the need for adoptee empowerment, self-advocacy, and the establishment of platforms that amplify adoptee voices. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of adoptees actively participating in shaping international standards and influencing the practices of States and adoption professionals.

The landscape of adoption has undergone a profound evolution in recent decades, slowly marked by a shift in focus from siloed and transactional systems to a more inclusive and adoptee-centered perspective. This progression is reflected in the overall rhythm of the social work field globally. In essence, formalized and government owned child protection systems often struggle to have the nimbleness needed to care for each individual child's unique needs. However, amidst the juggernauts of systems, good people continue to advocate for a person-centered approach to child protection. The shift globally to a human-centered and interpersonal perspective is far from complete, but a critical mass is beginning to form.

The Evolution of Adoption Practices

Historically, adoption processes were shrouded in secrecy, with information closely guarded and communication channels limited. Adoptees often faced a lack of understanding and empathy from society, and their perspectives were seldom considered in policy-making or adoption practices. However, the past few decades have witnessed a **seismic shift, with a growing acknowledgment of the importance of adoptee voices**

in shaping the narrative, and in some contexts also in reviewing applicable standards based on lessons learnt. One significant aspect of this evolution is the recognition of **adoptees as professionals**. Adoptees are not merely passive recipients of services but are active contributors to the discourse surrounding adoption. Many adoptees have pursued careers in social work, counseling, and advocacy, leveraging their unique insights to bridge the gap between theory and lived experiences. This shift challenges the traditional power dynamics within the adoption sector and highlights the importance of adopting a collaborative, inclusive approach. Across the entire child protection universe, "lived-experience" is being required, compensated for, and respected (see also DGD on Alternative Care, 2021)

Adoptee-Led Platforms and Resources

The rise of adoptee-led platforms (see also previous article) and forward-thinking organizations like ISS and in particular its International Reference Centre for the rights of children deprived of their family (IRC) and resources has been instrumental in fostering a sense of community among adoptees and providing a platform for sharing their lived experiences. These platforms play a dual role – as spaces for adoptees to connect with

each other and as avenues for educating the broader public about the multifaceted aspects of adoption.

Social media, blogs, and support groups have become powerful tools for adoptees to articulate their narratives, discuss challenges, and offer support to others navigating similar journeys. The collective strength of these voices has given rise to a **more nuanced and authentic understanding of adoption, challenging stereotypes and dispelling misconceptions**. There is greater public discourse on the true underlying issues within adoption such as:

- Inconsistencies and variations in adoption laws and procedures across countries and regions.
- Potential for unethical practices, including human trafficking, baby selling, and exploitation of vulnerable birth parents.
- Challenges for adoptees in terms of identity formation, cultural disconnect, and a sense of belonging.
- Issues related to transparency in the adoption process, including limited access to birth records and information for adoptees.
- Lack of Post-Adoption Support and Services.

Moreover, adoptee-led resources have proven invaluable in providing guidance and assistance to adoptees at various stages of their lives. From counseling services to informational materials on identity exploration, these resources empower adoptees to navigate the complexities of their unique journeys. The existence of such platforms not only facilitates individual healing but also contributes to the broader discourse on adoption, paving the way for more informed and empathetic practices.

As the adoption sector continues to evolve, here's what we need more of:

1. Inclusive Policies:

States should prioritize the development and implementation of inclusive adoption policies that recognize the diverse needs of adoptees. These policies should go beyond the transactional aspects of adoption

and address the lifelong impact on the individuals involved.

2. Education and Training:

Adoption professionals, including social workers, counselors, and legal practitioners, should undergo comprehensive training that includes an understanding of adoptee experiences. This training should emphasize cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed practices, and the importance of adoptee-led initiatives.

3. Collaborative Decision-Making:

States and adoption professionals should actively involve adoptees in decision-making processes related to adoption policies, procedures, and practices. Adoptees bring a unique perspective that can enhance the effectiveness and relevance of these initiatives.

4. Support for Adoptee-Led Initiatives:

Governments and adoption professionals should allocate resources to support adoptee-led initiatives, including advocacy groups, support networks, and educational programs. Recognizing the value of these initiatives contributes to a more holistic and inclusive approach to adoption.

5. Accessible Mental Health Services:

Recognizing the potential mental health challenges faced by adoptees, States should ensure the availability and accessibility of mental health services that are sensitive to the unique needs arising from adoption-related experiences.

As we look to the future, it is crucial for states and adoption professionals to actively engage with adoptees, incorporating their perspectives into policymaking and implementation. By embracing a collaborative and inclusive approach, we can ensure that the adoption sector continues to evolve, providing support and understanding to all those involved in the adoption journey.



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