

InterCountry Adoption Breakdown

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But .. if I don't publish there, will be a blog on my website.

What does that term even mean to an intercountry adoptee? Does it necessarily refer to when we are removed from the first family who thought we would create their "forever family" and placed into a second family .. this US phenomenon of "rehoming"? Or does it refer to a situation less black and white? Is it considered adoption breakdown when we end up with one or two adoptive parents who clearly suffered mental health issues (only realised years later from good therapy) whereby the adoptee's life is constantly controlled by the outbursts of unhealthy ongoing emotionally damaging family dynamics which results in the adoptee moving out of home and away from such contamination as soon as possible? Is it an adoption breakdown when the adoptive parents have been emotionally / physically / sexually abusive since the beginning of arrival in new family yet the adoptee stays in their legal care despite the obvious "breakdown" of trust and commitment on the adoptive parent's behalf? Is it considered an adoption breakdown when the same scenario above occurs but whereby the adoptee suicides, is murdered, or takes successful legal criminal action against them? Is it an adoption breakdown when the adopted child, old enough to try and tell the adoption agency and new adoptive parents that she remembers her family, that she's not abandoned but has actually been trafficked - it's just she doesn't have that terminology yet - and their response is to refuse to do anything about it except tell her to be grateful that she's in this wonderful first world country away from poverty with better opportunities? So she lives her whole adopted life feeling depressed, anxious, suicidal and just wishing she could be reunited with her family, eventually by sheer will power she does and confirms they are

alive and yes, her mother never gave consent but she was trafficked by her father? Is it considered adoption breakdown when the adoptive parents and adoptive country fail to complete all the adoptee's paperwork and years later as an adult the adoptee gets flagged for failing to be a "citizen" of the adoptive country and they get deported back to their country of birth? These are all real live scenarios of intercountry adoptees involved in my organisation, InterCountry Adoptee Voices which began in 1998 and connects adoptees from any country of origin, adopted to countries around the world.

At which point do we draw the line for determining the definition of "adoption breakdown" and who is making this decision? I'm sure if it were adoptees creating the definition, all of the above scenarios would be considered adoption breakdowns. As an intercountry adoptee having lived the experience and learning what impact these scenarios have had on individuals, I believe we need to listen to and include the adult intercountry adoptees in all important policy discussions surrounding "adoption breakdowns". Ultimately it us, the adoptees, who are disempowered, we are the pawns in this industry called intercountry adoption! We are the only stakeholder involved in the triad who never had a say in the process of being adopted. The industry owes us the ethical right to be included when our lives are so drastically altered and impacted. To date, we continue to be alienated and excluded from the policy makers forums despite the fact we are now as old as those making the decisions on our behalf. We are old enough to be parents ourselves, we are professionals in our own rights, and we have the added benefit of lived experience to help inform policy that impacts our younger generations of future intercountry adoptees.

Our greatest input into the shady grey zones possibly considered "adoption breakdown" comes from our adoptee led organisations whereby we offer peer support.

The value of peer support cannot be underestimated and needs to be recognised by governments to fund us to do this better. The multiple adoptee led groups on almost every continent have all acted to connect intercountry adoptees and try in whatever limited way, with no existing funding from our governments, to support one another despite these awful scenarios and situations some of us find ourselves in. Our support comes from shared journeys, shared realities, from travelling the adoptee path together whereby we can validate, empathise, give encouragement and reduce feelings of isolation.

One way in which governments, professionals, and adoption agencies should look at involving adult adoptees as peer support for adoption breakdown scenarios is to always include a peer in any professional clinical or government facility designed to assist an adoptee who has experienced an adoption breakdown. The value of the peer on the job is that professionals who are not adopted are not able to be as sensitive to what triggers us or makes us feel unsafe. Having someone in the room to support, help us feel connected and understood from our perspective, allows us to create a safe place for the adoptee and ensure they are not re-wounded as an unintended by-product of seeking professional support.

Intercountry adoptees are asking more and more loudly why little is done to give us any means for legal justice or recourse when worst case scenarios of adoption breakdown occur? Ultimately the adoptee in intercountry adoption has very little legal rights to take action due to a number of factors:

- a. there is no international legal framework for which to even consider these cases;
- b. there are no legal experts who have the specialised knowledge to take on our cases;

c. we have no financial or emotional supports to assist us even if we wished to seek justice;

d. the Hague Convention on Intercountry adoption actually facilitates these scenarios so the general public's conception is surrounded by lack of support and empathy and no legal willpower by our country's powers to be to change it;

e. There is no independent international body who can legally investigate where things have gone wrong and provides a place that adoptees can go to and not be afraid to talk about the truth and seek legal advice.

There is also very little research that looks longitudinally at the "success" or otherwise of intercountry adoptees. Most research is conducted at the ages where an adoptee remains within the control and authority of the adoptive parents i.e. under 18yrs of age, so does not reflect mature adult adoptee's self perception of their idea of adoption "success". Maturity and life experience helps provide us the tools to more critically examine the factors of what comprised our adoptive families and environments and how our adoptions were facilitated.

Adoption breakdown ultimately questions the success or otherwise of our adoptions. Do adoption breakdowns occur because of the failures within Hague Convention on intercountry adoption? Yes. The Hague Convention fails to consider the darkest sides of intercountry adoption and identify possibility of adoption breakdowns! The Hague Convention needs to be revised to include the real life scenarios that occur and the definition itself needs to be revised with inclusive input from those who are impacted most - the adoptees.

What is done once an adoption breakdown is recognised? Currently if the adoption breakdown were to be experienced by adoptees who are unhappy and not fitting into in their adoptive homes, there is little to help support them except for adoptee peer support if they are connected in via the internet. Due to the legality of “being as if born to” their adoptive parents, there is nothing that can be done unless child abuse or some type of proof warrants investigation and intervention by child protection authorities. So the question of how best to prevent, then becomes an issue of how the child can be checked up on, independent from the organisation who facilitated the adoption?

Adoptees like myself have advocated for some time of the need for sequential independent checkups of intercountry adoptees. Whether that checkup be 5 yearly or some other timeframe until mid 20s, the current followup needs to be expanded from the first year post placement followup that some sending countries require. It would at least be a step in the right direction but again, I emphasise the importance of that checkup being done independent from the adoption agency or government department who facilitated the adoption.

Another good option to facilitate an informal type of checkup, is to fund and ensure adoptee peer support in a mentoring capacity is established from the beginning when a child enters their new adoptive family. This is especially relevant for older age adoptees who are capable of talking and sharing with another adoptee. Those who have experienced a similar scenario are best attuned to sensing if something is not right within an adoptee’s life. We need an opportunity to speak with the adoptee and be their “mentor” during their life to checkup and ensure they are not hiding their adoption breakdown out of fear and lack of resources, but have an avenue to safely talk about the realities of what’s happening in their life and proactively seek help when needed.

What legal, financial, emotional, social, cultural supports are put in place to support intercountry adoptees who experience an adoption breakdown? Currently there are none specific to intercountry adoption. Depending on country of residence, an adoptee falls victim to whatever welfare supports their adopted country does or doesn't provide. They could end up seeking support for housing because they've had to get away from a deadly dynamic within the home environment; they might end up seeking support and counselling from post adoption organisations if they exist; they require financial assistance if they are at the age of not being financially independent. It is a huge task to require someone who is emotionally suffering from adoption breakdown to expect them to know how to navigate the welfare system in order to protect themselves from further emotional / physical / harm within their adoptive family. Usually they are just existing in survival mode. Ideally who should the support be provided by? I believe it needs to be an independent organisation who intimately understands child welfare and human rights, has not been involved in the facilitation of the adoption in any way, and understands the legal framework of intercountry adoption.

Lastly I want to question where is the accountability of those who facilitated the adoption when it breaks down? There currently is none. An adoptee can only ever place a criminal case against an individual if there is proof of abuse or falsification of documents - but this does not extend to suing for damages against an adoption agency or adopting or relinquishing government. Also, we should not forget the financial incentive that exists in countries like then USA to place a child badly, requiring rehoming whereby the same agencies continue to charge fees when placing the same child multiple times.

Intercountry adoption breakdown is the worst possible outcome for the adoptee. In these instances the adoptee does not experience adoption as having been “in their best interests” and the world has a long way to go, as outlined in this short piece, to addressing the realities of adoption breakdown as experienced from the perspective of the intercountry adoptee.