



Inter Country Adoptee Voices



Submission

*As a Priority Group :
Adopted people who have experienced
Abuse and / or Neglect*

for

*The Australian Government Consultation
on the “Successor Plan” to the National
Framework for Protecting Australia’s
Children 2019-2020*

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Introduction

InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV) is a peer support and advocacy network for intercountry adoptees. It began in Australia in 1998, founded by Lynelle Long out of the need to create a space to help adoptees connect and share their experiences in a supportive environment. It has continued to grow over the past 23 years, and is now an international organisation that connects adoptees from all over the world, providing the largest network to bring leaders of intercountry adoptee groups and activist adoptees together, to collaborate where we can and represent our voices at national and international levels.

Intercountry adoptees are a minority group within most mainstream populations. In Australia, there are 10,000 of us documented¹ with another 10,000 estimated as expatriate/private intercountry adoptions (done outside Australia's jurisdiction). Within this number, those living with abuse and neglect within their adoptive families are a subset of this and face even greater invisibility.

We wish to give our lived experience of abuse and neglect to highlight the issues impacting our minority group within the targeted **priority groups** of this consultation. Intercountry adoptees in general struggle to have our experiences represented in meaningful and truthful ways against the mainstream media narrative that speaks about us being "lucky", "saved" or "rescued". This mainstream narrative of adoption compounds the challenges intercountry adoptees face who live with abuse and neglect within their adoptive families. Relating to the words of Grace Tame, Australian of the Year 2020, "*Being the abused can be the loneliest place on earth*".² This aloneness and vulnerability is enhanced on steroids for intercountry adoptees who start life with so many additional traumas (separated from biological families, struggling to know their identity, having lost their natural place within their family, country, culture and race) and then being placed with strangers, on the assumption we will have a safe and loving family.

Sadly, the assumption of a safe and happy family is not always the case for intercountry adoptees. What makes us more invisible is that our cases are often not

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/adoptions>

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-31/what-grace-tame-win-means-for-survivors/13104108>

reported and any deaths or suicides relating to a neglectful or abusive history is not recorded in connection with being an adopted person.

This lack of reporting makes it impossible for policy makers to understand how wide the problem is or how to implement safety nets.

I cite the latest data that is available:

In the USA, Wexler³ points out rightly that the statistics kept by the child welfare system versus what independent research provides, shows a massive discrepancy. Some of the statistics quoted in Wexler's article states as high as 25-40% of children in foster care have been abused or neglected. If we assume adoption is somewhat similar, that's anywhere up to 4000 adoptees within the Australian intercountry adoption community alone could have lived abuse or neglect.

Due to the recent media coverage of the death of toddler Jeong-In⁴ in South Korea at the hands of her abusive adoptive parents, Grace Moon cites in her article⁵, "The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Korea has actually found that adopted children were 13.35% times more likely to be abuse victims." This is the only statistic I am aware of that directly connects adoption and abuse. All other data captures only fostered children because they remain within the child welfare system and are regularly checked up on. In comparison, as adoptees, we only ever have visibility to cases of *extreme* abuse or neglect when it hits the media; and even then, rarely are these cases linked to being an adopted child and the extra vulnerabilities they face in adoptive families.

A prime example from our Australian context, is the most recent April 2021 article of a South Australian adoptee, not even allowed to be named, but is the daughter of adoptive mother Jenni Wilmott. In Jordanna Schriever's article titled "*Police withdraw criminal neglect and assault charges against Flagstaff Hill woman Jenni Wilmott*" she outlines that the criminal neglect and assault charges are withdrawn at this stage but the investigation is ongoing and possible charges will be relaid in the future. The adopted

³ <https://youthtoday.org/2017/09/abuse-in-foster-care-research-vs-the-child-welfare-systems-alternative-facts/>

⁴ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Society/A-baby-s-death-casts-shadow-on-South-Korea-s-adoption-industry>

⁵ <https://medium.com/crimebeat/a-korean-family-brutally-abused-and-killed-their-adopted-baby-b37a9d9c60d5>

daughter took her own life and was clearly traumatised. We will never know how much of that trauma was inflicted from her adoptive parents because it's too late now but it's suffice to read the article and understand there are substantial questions around possible abuse suffered by this adoptee before she took her life and the police have not ruled out further charges.

The South Australian case highlights that suicide rates of adoptees are also not recorded or captured by governments or authorities and yet within our ICAV community, we know from lived experience there remains a strong connection between suicide of adoptees and their ongoing traumas suffered in adoptive families. It is not just an Australian issue, Tsega Lemma⁶, adopted from Ethiopia to a USA family who abused her (the adoption also broke down and she was placed into another family), took her own life in March this year.

Another recent (2019) Australian case hit the media of an adoptee from the Philippines being beaten and abused by her Australian adoptive parents in Perth⁷.

UK domestic adoptee Paul Tovey has published an adoptee led survey this month to raise awareness and gain support of the need for UK adoption legislation to be modified, allowing adoptees the right to revoke their adoption, particularly when they've experienced abuse and neglect in adoptive family. His survey⁸ of 95 adoptees so far, shows an abuse rate of 42% and hence the reason why they are seeking the ability to revoke their adoption.

I am also aware of Australian adult adoptee requests for revocation being directly connected with abuse from adoptive families. William Hammersley⁹ ¹⁰ died just as he was granted his adoption revocation but he wasn't shy in sharing about the abuse he suffered

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/intercountryadopteeemorials>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/sep/05/wa-couple-jailed-for-beating-adopted-daughter-and-locking-her-in-shipping-container>

⁸ https://adultadopteeadoptionannulment.blogspot.com/2021/07/16th-july-2021-on-adoptee-revocation.html?fbclid=IwAR1ALXeV5Bu2RMYXjdj2yIrEw8Aqmg6jHxqVemymvwDcCnG_KfabtC8OuSM&m=1

⁹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/last-wish-give-me-back-my-true-identity-says-adopted-man-20190330-p5195i.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/children-entitled-to-their-history/news-story/481ff9c01627e7cec9610c452bf3f705>

from his adoptive family. There are another couple of Australian intercountry adoption revocations in the past 2 years that I'm aware of, also connected to abuse within adoptive families.

We have no published data specific to intercountry adoptees in Australia that I'm aware of, to measure our long term outcomes or what rates of abuse and neglect we live, however ICAV has many members who share this as a lived experience. Perhaps with some funding ICAV or some other independent organisation could conduct a study into these lived experiences within the intercountry adopted population.

The only data ICAV can refer you to, was taken from a 2017 adoptee led survey¹¹ conducted from the USA, distributed worldwide but not extensively, in which abuse and neglect was captured with 272 respondents being asked, 22 responded from Australia. Within that survey, 37% reported physical or verbal abuse in their adoptive families.

The inherent assumption within child welfare that adoption is a positive outcome and that we are placed in safe families contrasts to reality. From lived experience within ICAV, we know this is not the fact and an older independent USA report¹² also supports this. Our goal for participating in this consultation, is to lift us out of being invisible and demonstrate we are a **priority group** the Australian government needs to be including in discussions that involve our lived experience of abuse and neglect. We are one of our communities most vulnerable populations, far more vulnerable than foster children for the mere fact no-one does any long term followup on us once we are legally adopted into our new forever homes.

Our contribution here is from a small group of 5 who have this lived experience of living abuse and neglect AND being an intercountry adoptee in Australia. If time and resources had permitted, we would have included others but we are a non-funded organisation and everyone contributes voluntarily. Our experiences differ which is threaded through our responses, to provide a nuanced perspective of how living with abuse and neglect AND being an intercountry adoptee is a hugely complex experience.

¹¹ <https://adoptionsurveysblog.wordpress.com/2017/11/28/results-in-adult-adoptee-perceptions-in-international-adoption/>

¹² https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B291mw_hLAJsV1NUVGRVUmdyb28/view?resourcekey=0-tBFng8l-FIQ13H7kkC871A

I hope in future we shall see some positive changes to the assumptions inherent in adoption and that our submission will help shape things for the future to better protect one of our most vulnerable groups - Australia's intercountry adopted people.

Huge thanks to *Chamila, C, Jonas, and My Huong* who gave their time and energy to share their private struggles so that we might make it better for others who suffer the same fate, following in our footsteps. We aim to help their journey be made somewhat better, with more nuanced supports, to give them the possibility of better outcomes.

We also hope this paper encourages policy and legislation professionals, to realise the benefits of learning from those with lived experience and listening to find ways forward, out of what is often traumatic and complex situations.

Regards

Lynelle Long

Founder & Executive Director

InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)

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Chamila

What can be done to help intercountry adoptee children stay safe from Abuse & Neglect in their adoptive homes?

As an adopted child from the 70's, I found that there was a lack of continual follow up and check-ins with child protective services throughout my childhood. I think that an adopted child should have continual yearly or 6 month visits from a representative from child protective services/trained child psychologist until they are a legal adult (18 years of age) or up until the child is 16.

There also needs to be constant support for the adoptive parents, so they have an avenue to express any concerns they are experiencing with the adopted child with a professional who can assist them in making the child's experiences positive and give them tools to enable them as parents to help create a safe, loving environment for the child.

If there are biological children in the new adopted child's home, they also need to be assessed and have access to services which will help them adjust to the assimilation of a new child in the family. There also needs to be constant assessment of the biological children as well. It should be an end-to-end service encompassing the whole family, not just the adopted child. Ideally, we need a service being provided to all parties involved in the whole lifelong process of being an adopted person.

I also feel that teachers and doctors need to also be involved at some point in the introduction of an adopted child into a new family. They need to be aware of the complex emotional state an adopted child can live and understand how best to assist in ensuring that child is safe.

How was your experience of finding and using support?

As a child already speaking my native language and adopted from a non-English speaking country to an English speaking country, I had no way to communicate my needs in English with my adoptive family. So did I have easy access to support? The answer is no. I could not communicate with anyone until I had learnt to speak English, so in some aspects I feel I should have been provided with a mentor of sorts, who spoke my language, who was a part of the process and someone I could have talked to. Being unable

to communicate with anyone really disabled me, as I was solely reliant on my adoptive parents to meet my needs.

What Barriers did you face when trying to find or use supports?

As an adopted child who did not speak English upon arriving into Australia the biggest issue was not being able to communicate to anyone that I needed support until learning English. If there was support as a child I was never made aware of any of those services, and if my adopted parents were aware of any services offered, I was never made aware of them.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

This I feel comes down to creating new regulations on the adoption process where mandatory reviews are conducted yearly or every 6 months until the adopted child comes of age. If a child is from a foreign country, a mentor should be provided of the same ethnicity, who can speak the language to help the child initially communicate their needs and be aware of who they can turn to when issues arise. Adoptive parents should be given more counselling and support prior to adoption of a child, and be educated about the probable issues they may encounter with an adoptive child and guidance on how to work through those issues. Information needs to be provided on where to find resources to assist them and where to find the best help that will suit their requirements.

What information does the government need, to make life better for vulnerable children?

Specific statistical data regarding era, country of adoption, family dynamics, financial dynamics, religious and cultural influences.

Individual testimonials from adopted children and the adoptive parents, also including biological children in the statistics.

Full transparency of the actual adoption process, such as how much research and background is done on the family home and the prospective parents and mental state of the biological children, if there are any.

More data correlated on the prevalence of abuse and neglect amongst adopted children.

What information should be shared between NGO's and Govt?

I think all information should be shared and it should be very transparent.

What skills do you think professionals in the NGO and Govt sectors need to support vulnerable children?

The skills I think that both NGOs and government need are people with social work experience and mental health training (first aider), possibly older adopted children who are wanting to be mentors to prospective families and adopted children. They have to be neutral without an agenda. The individuals need to want to help all parties involved, not just the adopted child.

How can those professionals learn the right skills to do their job?

These individuals need access to training as well as being exposed to environments where they can observe first hand situations where neglect and abuse have occurred, they need to be involved at the ground level. They also need to have free access to their own mental self-health as well, as a job like this could be quite emotionally taxing and will need to learn how to manage and compartmentalise their own reactions to things that they may be exposed to.

What supports and services can help children who have experienced Abuse & Neglect?

An anonymous telephone hot line in each state specifically for children, free counselling and therapy services. Workshops such as ones run by Protective Behaviours. Mentors who can just listen to the child and act as a friend (non-judgemental). A continual auditing process should be carried out each year to ensure that what is being provided is effective and make necessary changes where needed to improve the system.

What supports and services can help if they can't live in their home because of Abuse & neglect?

I do not think an adopted child should be put into the Australian foster care system, I think funding should be provided for safe houses for children of abuse and neglect with a trained care giver who acts as a fully trained and experienced den mother. The safe house would have an on-site counsellor (psychologist) who can provide emotional and mental support. According to each child's individual need a program should be developed to help the child develop and grow in a loving environment (This also means possibly providing translators).

What supports and services could help children to stay in their homes if they've experienced Abuse & Neglect?

I personally do not feel a child should be kept in a home where they are experiencing abuse or neglect. If the child is adopted, efforts need to be made for the child to be placed in a family who will provide a positive environment to help the child grow and develop in a loving environment. Abuse & Neglect victims should not be placed back with the adoptive parents as the cycle will continue. Sure things might be okay for a while, but once abused or neglected by a caregiver, I do not see that care giver being reformed and the child should not be placed back with them.

Did you know about the Transition to independent Living Allowance (TILA) which helps young people when the leave Out of home care Did you use TILA?

No I have not heard of TILA.

C Sri Lanka Adoptee

What can be done to help intercountry adoptee children stay safe from Abuse & Neglect in their new adoptive homes?

Provide ongoing Trauma Informed Care Training for kids and primary carers and schools. Provide regular meetings or checking in on families who are at risk and struggling. Look for and know potential red flags.

How was your experience finding and using supports and services?

Nothing was in a one-stop hub set up. Each service did not confer or talk together or share info/resources enough regularly. People have to ring around and keep doing their own search once a service has closed or support person has moved on, or service has failed to work or be the right fit.

Some of the services I really needed were too expensive or too short term and not highly skilled enough. A lot of basic general services with low skills that were too government based and not enough services tailored with lived experience or understanding of a human's day-to-day living and struggle in mind.

What barriers did you face when trying to find or use supports?

Not enough affordable specialist treatment services for grief and loss and life transition: for trauma or adoption or brain neuroscience/neuro feedback/somatic body recovery treatments. Not enough diversity, a lot of sheltered, rich white privileged services with no understanding of cultural or language dislocation, adult attachment - trauma in adults. Not enough inclusive social or psycho-social support (education, employment, or social activities) for those adults with Mental Health barriers; in housing who do not have family, friends, or support networks.

We get forgotten, invisible and are expected to heal and be able to manage our lives, trauma on our own. Sometimes the extra help is there for those who can afford it or are limited to certain spectrums, rather than be adaptable to stages, transitions of life and recovery process and assessment of social/support network.

Those that have faced barriers or abuse and neglect as children, face interpersonal and adult attachment and emotional self-regulation limitations. We face issues of adjusting and integrating throughout our lives as adults. This affects being able to keep stable employment and complete education or sustain social connection. This further creates barriers to isolation and suicidal-ideation if disconnected from activities and human contact for prolonged periods of time.

How could the supports and services be made easier to find & use?

Have a one stop hub. When a new service comes up inform the individual/ community. Services or support workers/ counsellors/ agencies/ GP's notify clients who may benefit from those services. Get feedback from people with Lived Experience and service users of what they really need and want. Update and adapt/broaden those services, rather than create more of the same basic and average service that exclude. Get rid of, or upscale those services as being okay and some being poor services and not much in variety or very limited or poor skilled staff.

Stop building or running services in a government or administrative way that no average person in the general public could relate to or access. Instead make it more human and compassionate centred and trauma informed, right across the board. Have people with Lived Experience or who have been a service user themselves on the front desk instead of running services with people who have no life experience or no knowledge of people's real-life day to day distress and barriers-in mind.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

Make all services compulsory in Trauma Informed in training-gold standard service delivery. Including in organisational and individual practice.

Have freer or low-cost treatment or social engagement, education, recreation, employment services. Provide affordable psychosocial recovery coaches. Make sure there is a holistic Open Dialogue approach, whereby all the members and the whole team participates. In being transparent and inclusive and recovery oriented, client or survivor-centred - in engaging the people at risk of falling through the cracks.

Services need to adapt rather than asking vulnerable people to comply or adapt or acting threatening and controlling government-y in their manner or automated letters. Be more human and relational rather than English stiff and formal - it's more relatable, humane and compassionate.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

See people as humans suffering. Ask "what do you need" or "what has helped in the past"? Use a Strength Based model of engagement. Treat us as having resourceful intelligence and worthy of respect and as equals. Understand our backstory and trauma. Ask the Trauma Informed question of "what has happened" instead of asking "what is wrong with you". Listen to stories and learn and then chose as to how to be supportive without re-traumatising people.

Note the importance of self-reflection, staff reflection/ review regularly. Take notes. Have good supervision and peer review, admin support. Communicate and trouble shoot, feedback regularly with expert consultation and Peer Workers with Lived Experience and admin staff. Note your own triggers and judgments and seek support regularly. Note how you come across to services users - and ask if you would like to be treated in this way. Put yourself empathically in other's shoes. Ask yourself what has been the best service engagement you have had and what made that work and feel good, useful and effective?

Seek community consultation and have regular feedback or suggestion opportunities for service users to measure outcomes and improvements along the way as ongoing.

What information does the government need, to make life better for vulnerable children?

If there are people at risk then all parties should take responsibility to plan, monitor and participate in the healing, rehabilitation and integration through the people's lives.

There is legal information, there is duty of care information, there is medical and mental wellbeing information. People need to be informed along the way and not allow gaps with silence and being kept guessing about the progress of some activity or action

under way. Make sure all is done with the consent and adjustments of inclusive transparency and access to the person being supported.

All levels who engage with the vulnerable need to have Trauma Informed training, Mental Health First Aid and Suicide Prevention training. They need to be regularly audited to make sure vulnerable people are not exploited and protective factors and safeguards are close by. Avenues at all levels, need to have built in crisis management, available protection, feedback or complaint mechanisms that are accessible for everyone and by any service, government or not. They all need to be accountable at every level.

Let people know along the way of how to engage services and inform service users. Write a report/have a website/have regular public consultation and feedback. Co-design it with service users and those with Lived Experience who are most likely going to use the services.

What skills do you think professionals in the NGO and Govt sectors need to support vulnerable children?

On going Professional & Personal Development in Trauma Informed Care Approach training. Strength Based Approach training, Mental Health First Aid and Suicide Prevention training. Working with Complex Trauma training. Good listening and empathy, compassionate enquiry skills, insight and self-reflective skills. A non-judgemental stance and noting when you have taken a negative approach or had a reaction and trigger when working with certain minority and vulnerable groups. A humanist approach. Need to be able to share resources and communicate regularly with other stakeholders. Instigate regular peer review, supervision and feedback amongst colleagues and clients.

How can we change the child and family workforce to stop people leaving? Being too tired from doing their job?

Make sure staff understand the target group they are signed up and committing too. Make sure the staff don't have their own barriers, hidden agendas and lack of skill set for the job. Make sure staff are well supported and their wellbeing attended to. Provide internal and external support. Counselling debriefing training. Self-care and motivational, connection team building activities. Ask staff how they'd like to be stimulated and engaged and given a range of challenging projects. Make sure they understand that clients

need safety, security and consistency so it's important for their wellbeing. Pay attention to understand casual employees or disinterested and burnt-out reactive staff are not well matched with vulnerable clients. It re-triggers instability and hot emotions when anybody feels rejected, abandoned or passed around, especially if this has been their previous experience by the time they engage your service.

Priority Groups: What should we know about their experiences when they use these supports and services?

That a lot live alone, managing life with no support, family or friends. That a lot have hidden issues - vulnerability shows up in all sorts of ways. We live barriers adjusting to life in another culture, interpersonal struggles. Conflict resolution and emotional self-regulation barriers, self-esteem, substance or other personal barriers. Grief, loss and cultural dislocation and intergenerational trauma. It's important not to get triggered by presentations of intense emotions or anger that can be the presenting problem, but look deeper at the underlying issues. We have often been passed around by services, systems and institutions, over and over. This damages the nervous system and produces more agitated hyper vigilant engagement responses from people with backgrounds of complex trauma.

Children who have experienced abuse and neglect. What supports and services can help children who have experienced?

Psycho Education of trauma, brain and childhood developmental stages. Affordable trauma treatment to rewire the nervous system and brain. Early intervention programs for parents' schools and individuals. Knowing what to look for when someone is in distress or acting in ways that are calling out to be attended. Find out what is going on at home and follow up vulnerable people. Skills for how to self-regulate and keep safe. Hear and believe them. Match them with peers to talk to. Have safeguarding officers. Safe spaces and plain clothed Mental Health nurses or police at certain places so we can talk to them when at risk. Regular ongoing check-ins and engagement both for child and family to generate opportunities and safe places to talk.

If children can't live in their home because of abuse or neglect/or ones that help them stay in their homes?

Do on-going risk assessments. Remove the risk rather than the kid, make sure all services work together and the risk is known to all services and schools.

Otherwise if you have to remove them: Set up Trauma Informed Care Model led monitored alternatives: Transitional and recovery houses/refuges/safe alternative billeting family's programs that have a clinical team on the premises. Mental health schools for those who need support (like Rivendell). So they can continue brain develop and co-regulate with other nervous systems and finish developmental stages to reduce long term trauma - as they engage with some safe, stable and consistent spaces.

When kids start to become adults, what helps:

Somewhere health safe, stable and supportive to live or a safe space to go too. Good inspiring consistent role models. Education and ongoing conversations about boundaries, self-regulation, consent, bodies, safety and places where to go if we feel unsafe. Peer Support to talk to. Inform schools and services and train them in what to do if a person does approach them about their trauma, safety or wellbeing.

Did you know about TILA?

Did not ever use transitional allowance but I knew it might be available for those who need it.

Jonas

What can be done to help intercountry adoptee children stay safe from Abuse & Neglect in their new adoptive homes?

Checkups from trained professionals is needed. Right now adoptees have no followup. Someone should be visiting the child on a regular basis, even quarterly as a bare minimum. It's more important at the start because it's so traumatic when you first enter an adoptive home and especially if you're an older aged adoptee. If the professionals are well trained, they should be able to pick up and sense what's going on and whether the child is coping or not. A therapist would be ideal, to meet privately with the child, like a trauma counselling session to check-in on how they're doing. If an adoptive parent wants to be there, I'd encourage them not to be allowed because sometimes the kids can be manipulated. For example, when the foster kids were being checkup on in our family, all of us kids were groomed (told what to say) before the professionals came.

Support is needed. I don't think people understand what it's like to be ripped out of our country and culture and placed into a family and told how to act. I knew who my parents were but I was being told this is who your mother and father are now. I was having to pretend and act a certain way, or be punished if I didn't comply.

For me, religious affiliation is a huge red flag. In my experience, there was a "keeping up with the Jones" in a righteous way which conflicts and contradicts their teachings. It created a lot of inner turmoil for me and none of it made any sense. There was nobody to reach out too for support.

How was your experience of finding and using supports?

There was nothing for my whole life in Australia until just recently. It was only by chance I stumbled on ICAV¹³ as the first support I ever found, way too late, 34 years late.

For the abuse and neglect I lived, there has been no support. I've been forced to keep that quiet because there has been nowhere to speak about it that is suitable. I always equated adoption as them versus us (adoptive parents vs adoptees) and all the support and power is with the adoptive parents - so I never thought to search for support. I was

¹³ www.intercountryadopteevoices.com

never made to feel empowered. I felt like if I did, I'd be judged wrongly. I felt like the adoptive parents have all the power and attention. I was made to feel that all I was allowed to say, was about how grateful I am to be adopted to Australia.

What barriers did you face when trying to find or use supports?

Not applicable as I didn't know to try and find supports. There was a complete lack of available and useful information during my childhood and early adult years.

How could the supports and services be made easier to find & use?

By funding credible organisations like ICAV and advertise Kids Help Lines. I once ended up ringing the help line as a child but nothing happened to help me sadly.

Provide anything that encourages people to open up and speak out. The more people openly talk about it to normalise it, the more we survivors will realise we can reach out. Offer multiple avenues of support.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

Training and funding. Training people and therapists. Funding is the bigger issue for our community of intercountry adoptees. Right now not much is funded - in fact nothing for crisis situations. But if you put the funding in the right places, you can get the right results.

What information does the government need, to make life better for vulnerable children?

Stop porning us via intercountry adoption. Collect data from people with lived experience and hear it.

What information should be shared between NGOs and Govt?

Supports and professionals need to know that intercountry adoption is a legal form of human trafficking. Just because it's legal doesn't mean it's right, in my opinion. I don't

think it's ethical what is done to people like me. Whatever the purpose is for adopters, I don't think anyone has the right to take children out of their homes and cultures and place them with strangers, especially with no long term supports.

What skills do you think professionals in the NGO and Govt sectors need to support vulnerable children?

Professionals need to be trauma informed and learn from people with lived experience. They need to understand our paths to provide better support. It's basic understanding of human behaviour and psychology.

I suggest don't be afraid to isolate the child away from the abusive parent - we need an environment where we can feel safe. When listening to a child, professionals need to be able to pick up on cues and trust their gut. If I talked to a child and because of my lived experience, I'd pick up on the cues pretty quick and I pick up on adult energy all the time. People who have lived our experience can quite easily pick up suspicious behaviours. Unfortunately a lot of social workers are under resourced and time poor, even if they think there's something there, we children get nothing and become wards of the states. All we ask is that someone cares enough but even that feels hard. Professionals need to take more time to care.

How can those professionals learn the right skills to do their job?

We should have lived experience professionals who have this heightened sense to abusive adults. There's not as many of us adopted people as fostered people, but there's plenty of us who have grown up now and are willing to share what we know from lived experience. There are those of us who aren't completely broken and we have a lot to offer.

I don't have any formal education and training but yet I still get plenty of people seeking my lived experience and that tells me I have something valuable to offer.

What supports and services can help children who have experienced Abuse & Neglect?

Trauma counselling is essential. Having a trusted mentor would be ideal and would have helped before I got right up to the age where my hormones kicked in and the age of

falling out with my adoptive family. The abuse happened from within 2 weeks of me arriving to Australia, up to when I left / got kicked out, at age 13.

Check-ups need to happen. Support needs to be mandatory for adoptive parents after they've gone through the process of adopting. It's so important they feel supported and encouraged to be open and honest. They need to be given the opportunity to parent without bias, as long as there is no abuse. The dishonest parents are only worried about judgement. I learnt that for these types, if they don't express it, they manifest it physically on us children because they can't cope.

What supports and services can help if they can't live in their home because of Abuse & Neglect?

The truth is, I just don't know but I do know that a stable place to stay / roof over my head and consistency in the way I'm treated would have allowed me to build trust in someone and something, and would have allowed me to grow through my trauma. But I didn't have that opportunity. I was in half way houses, youth houses, on the streets for much of my early adult life.

The half way houses and youth homes were all youth supports / youth community programs. In these places I was always a fish out of water. The difference was, I wanted more whereas a lot of the kids had gone through traumas at home, some were running away, some from foster care - but for me, I was adopted from Haiti and I wanted to do things. I did have a drinking problem but I was cooperative and not antagonistic. I went under the radar because I wasn't causing trouble and people couldn't understand why I was even there. Support people would hear my story but that's where and real care stopped and I was never offered other potential helps to deal with my issues. All the others in the system came from families, being born here in Australia, and there was no understanding from staff of the additional traumas from my being intercountry adopted.

What supports and services could help children to stay in their homes if they've experienced Abuse & Neglect?

If abuse has gone on in the home, in foster care, the children are removed and then if the parent proves themselves, they get a second chance. But for us intercountry adoptees,

rarely is abuse or neglect identified because no-one checks on us. I would have been glad to be taken away from them forever.

I think the strategy needs to be different for a natural born child who is experiencing abuse from their parents. It's good to help keep the family as a unit as long as the parents are being made to address their abusive behaviours and given adequate supports. But for a child that's not theirs naturally, I don't think they should be given a second chance. It's too complex to ask the child to overcome that trauma and go back into that environment when they already feel second rate.

For kids like me, I become a ward of the state indefinitely. I stumbled over multiple people in helping me find my way and they had no horse in the race i.e., were given no money. They simply found it in their hearts to be kind and support me and help me find my way. I would far rather be a ward of the state and I know it's not a bed of roses. When we are adoptees, adopted at an older age, we are already independent and we make the best of the situation based on how we are treated. I definitely tried to please my adoptive mother. I did all things like clockwork. I was always easy and compliant except she would never allow me to climb the ladder and be given any form of freedom, respect or love. So by the time I was 12, I started to push back on them. I am naturally very compliant, street wise and socially intelligent and always treat people how I wanted to be treated - it was taught to me by my family and homeland in Haiti.

Did you know about the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which helps young people when they leave Out of Home Care?

No. I did not know about TILA. I knew about Youth Allowance and it was definitely helpful but I was a child with no money handling training and it was like \$240 per fortnight. But it wasn't enough. None of it means anything if you don't have the support around you. I would far rather support guidance and a peer mentor, someone who understood me.

If there's any way to fund orgs like ICAV out there to give voice to our experience, we should find ways to fund that. It can do a lot of good not just for adoptees, but for educating people who are thinking of adoption to help them think of both sides.

Lynelle

What can be done to help intercountry adoptee children stay safe from Abuse & Neglect in their new adoptive homes?

There is a false and inherent assumption in this question that ADOPTION results in children staying safe from neglect and abuse when in fact, I will argue from life experience that adoption, by the very nature of how it's done (to sever us completely from everything that is ours, including our identity), places us in a very, very vulnerable situation where we have no independent ally and more importantly, we are not checked up on, unlike our other alternative care peers - those in foster care, guardianship, kinship care, permanent care. Our other peers all have, at least in theory, regular checkups by professionals to ensure their well being. As adoptees, adoption is seen as a private family matter and the parents can do as they wish without ever having anyone raise the red flags outside the normal avenues of school or medical checkups. Our whole well being is totally within their hands and all states who conduct today's form of plenary adoption are delusional to assume that *all* adoptive parents will treat children not biologically related to them well and keep them safe. Within ICAV, I keep track of fellow intercountry adoptees who suicide, of adoptees who live abuse, who are murdered at the hands of their adoptive families, or whose adoptions breakdown. I can attest through the vast network I have founded and run for over 20 years that there are TOO MANY intercountry adoptees who live the life of being abused and neglected by the very people the states and authorities assume will be good to us.

Most people when they couple the words abuse/neglect with adoption, assume that it occurs to us at the hands of our often demonised biological families/parents. What I want to raise as awareness in this consultation, is *that adoptive families are just as capable as our biological families of inflicting neglect and abuse.*

So in answer to the question what can be done to help us, as a very niche cohort within the context of "children" in our society, I say we need to change the way adoption is talked about, educated on, and legislated - to get rid of the inherent assumptions that abuse and neglect doesn't happen to adopted children. Adopted children must somehow be independently monitored and followed up on as a starting place. Research in the foster care space highlights those vulnerable children's plight in terms of being more at risk than the children who stay within their biological family domains. I argue given there is NO

Australian research in this area in adoption, that we adoptees are just as at risk as fostered children and even more so, because there is no long term followup. We are left to fend for ourselves once we reach the age of being able to independently look after ourselves. Often after so many years of abuse and neglect, it is lucky if we even survive the streets, turning to drugs or other means to numb our pains. Abuse and neglect is terrible for any child but the impacts are massively multiplied in children like us who enter this country as vulnerable children and placed in stranger families without a voice, without any avenues for protection should those families be doing the wrong thing. Our traumas began long before we reached this country and family and become compounded by an abusive or neglectful adoptive family.

Unless you can guarantee all adoptive families are safe, supportive, able to connect to stranger children who come from vulnerable and traumatic backgrounds, I suggest we should not be adopting children. One child being abused in an adoptive family is one too many, as far as I'm concerned. When you are the one having to live that experience, you'll understand why we speak out. Unless you ensure children adopted into families are followed up on long term, until we conduct an investigation into the long term outcomes of adopted children, I don't believe we should be doing it as a solution for vulnerable children. It's bad enough that children within biological families be abused and neglected. But to purposively continue to allow it to happen to children who have no say in being sent here - it is a tragic when these children end up in abusive homes.

How was your experience of finding and using supports?

I never found any as a child until I left my adoptive family home. There was no ways of knowing that I could possibly be listened to, heard, or even seen while I was young and living that abuse. I never felt safe in my family, my adoptive family was seen in the community as being so righteous, how could anyone believe me? I tried to say to a few people that my home was unsafe but I was told off by my adoptive family for telling "lies". I had friends who came to my house and saw the way I was treated, but they were kids themselves. One adult, a young man whom my adoptive father employed as a farm hand for a short time, he spoke out directly at my adoptive father for the way he was treating me but my father sacked him. I never saw him again. My mother was a school principal, how could my family possibly be an abusive one in the eyes of the community? Realistically, is there any place a young child who's being abused and mistreated can turn to when they are in the midst of it and they are just a child - our word against big grown

up adults? There is in reality no supports until we get old enough to try and navigate the world by ourselves. Usually at age 18 as we are then seen by law to be able to make decisions for ourselves as an “adult”.

As a young adult at early 20s and after moving states, by the time I realised I could reach out for help for my many issues - I eventually stumbled across a sexual abuse healing support program for women run by Wesley Mission. It changed my life! Finding a group of other women survivors impacted me in profound ways - knowing I wasn't alone, being believed, having a safe space to talk about my experience out loud and be validated ... wow, all of those experiences was just mind blowing. My journey of healing began because of that program. I recall I only knew about it because I saw a poster ad on their window as I walked past daily.

After I explored the sexual abuse issues, I started realising I had more issues going on that were controlling my life. I eventually stumbled across adoption spaces. I found post adoption support and attended their day program, meeting other domestic adoptees. It was good but they really didn't understand intercountry adoption and their State funding to this day, is still largely for domestic adoptees. This is a major issue for post adoption support in Australia - that most of their funded services are geared towards domestic adoptees - the large majority instead of those of us born and adopted overseas, placed into racially different families who have no training nor understanding of racial and cultural issues.

Because I never found any real support that was capable of providing in one space for the whole range of complex issues I lived, I ended up creating ICAV¹⁴. 23 years later it is still going strong and it continues to provide a huge part of the supports our community needs. ICAV is however completely unfunded and runs on volunteer energy for over 2 decades. There is still plenty more that our community needs, like crisis support, search and reunion support, DNA genealogy support, racial identity support, legal support, that needs funding.

What barriers did you face when trying to find or use supports?

The biggest barrier is the current funded supports not understanding the many complex issues I lived. Intercountry adoption support typically doesn't talk about or cover

¹⁴ www.intercountryadopteevoices.com

sexual abuse in adoptive families. There's never been one seminar I've ever seen worldwide on the topic in any post adoption space. Those of us who live it, are left entirely to fend for ourselves and yet I know the multiple complexities that these dual traumas create. Sadly, too many of us who are impacted by both adoption AND abuse/neglect in our adoptive families, live the ongoing consequences with NO support because NONE exists.

How could the supports and services be made easier to find & use?

Fund them first to even allow them to exist. We can't find them if they don't exist. Fund them and ensure that lived experience guides how the support should be provided.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

Listen to and actively seek our lived experience input in all the forums and spaces that need to learn from us i.e., in all policy and legislative discussions and forums (like this one).

What information does the government need, to make life better for vulnerable children?

You need to actively CARE. Employ only people with empathy and real compassion, who want to listen and make a difference in our lives. There is too much bureaucracy in government and not enough "getting in contact with us at the ground" to truly hear what goes on. You've got to feel it to then be motivated to make the changes we need. Government needs to be our ally. If it's just a job, just a policy that has no connection to our lived experience, then you shouldn't be in government making decisions that impact real people's lives.

What information should be shared between NGOs and Govt?

In the adoption space, I believe the huge barrier for properly addressing the needs of the neglected and abused adoptive children, is that States and Authorities won't take their responsibility of being the child's ally and guardian seriously. There needs to be major changes to adoption legislation to make it truly child centric. We know and have been saying for decades that the current Plenary adoption system does not respect our rights to

identity. In terms of children being abused and neglected in adoption, there has to be the recognition that there should be long term followup on this very vulnerable population. There needs to be more resources put in place to ensure adoptive families are given tons - an overkill of support - as compared to the current *underwhelming* amount of post adoption support. There needs to be a better connection between mental health and adoption organisations to ensure mental health professionals are properly trained in trauma and understand the connection between adoption trauma and loss as it's foundation, and with the overlaying abuse and neglect of our specific cohort.

Lived experience needs to be what guides training and education to these professionals in both domains. The cross over areas need to provide a seamless case management system for the vulnerable adopted child.

What skills do you think professionals in the NGO and Govt sectors need to support vulnerable children?

Compassion, empathy, the ability to listen and be our ally, and translate our lived experience knowledge into positive change for the victims.

How can those professionals learn the right skills to do their job?

Actively seek out the lived experience knowledge. Include us regularly so you don't lose sight of what your job is all about. Stay connected to the community of impacted people. It needs to start in the way we train those professionals. Our social workers, psychologists, doctors, teachers, lawyers, they should all be exposed to the lived experience views of the people they serve.

Focused workshops in the areas of intercountry adoption AND abuse/neglect should be provided in the community so these professionals can access the knowledge easily. It's these intersecting areas we need to do better at, instead of treating each domain as a silo of knowledge without crossing over the knowledge pools. For example, the current ICAFSS¹⁵ federally funded counselling service needs to be radically uplifted in terms of funding and scope. Currently there is no crisis support and there is not enough funding to ensure other critical professionals, supports and services are educated and connected in to understand the intersections in knowledge bases. I have heard too many

¹⁵ <https://www.rasa.org.au/services/couples-families/intercountry-adoptee-service/>

times from struggling, deeply traumatised intercountry adoptees in rehabilitation centres - sharing how their trauma experts have no knowledge of intercountry adoption and its underlying traumas.

What supports and services can help children who have experienced Abuse & Neglect?

It has to start with proper education to the right professionals - doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers, police, mental health workers, they all need to be cross educated in adoption AND neglect/abuse - to learn about the impacts and to gain insight as to how they can best help us. Most importantly they need to be equipped with knowledge of where to refer us for specific support and help. Those specific supports need to exist and be adequately funded and lived experience needs to be actively consulted to inform the practice of that service.

What supports and services can help if they can't live in their home because of Abuse & Neglect?

If an intercountry adoptee has experienced abuse and neglect and the authorities intervene and the adoptee can't live at that home anymore (probably doesn't want to anyway) - I suggest the adoptee be given support and the possibility of returning to their birth country and family and helped with all the trauma they now have to deal with, as well as integrating back into their country and life. For some reason, intercountry adoptees whose adoptions fail are placed within our local state welfare system and then live more life of hell being sent around through foster families. Not once is the intercountry adoptee ever offered the option to return to their homeland and have the option to grow up there where they choose to belong. Not every adoptee who has lived an adoption breakdown would even want to go back - but it should as a minimum be offered.

I say this because my adoption was never finalised and I got adopted 16.5 years AFTER I'd been in Australia. No judge or social worker ever offered me an alternative to being adopted legally into that abusive family. It was assumed this was the best option and at age 17, I never truly had a comprehension of what plenary adoption does nor was I given any option to have my identity in Vietnam look for or be given help. I had effectively been trafficked into this Australian family and with the help of the VIC State, I

was formally adopted 16.5 years after I'd arrived as an infant. And despite the many years from age 5 - 14 of being abused by multiple people in that adoptive family, the VIC State did ONE interview with me to determine and proceed to rubber stamp my adoption with them. To me this highlights the lack of truly caring for the child and simply doing what adoptive families want. As an adopted child at that time, I had no power, no allies to truly listen to me, and there were certainly NO offers of support or help during those terrible years in my childhood and early adulthood.

What supports and services could help children to stay in their homes if they've experienced Abuse & Neglect?

Why would any adopted child want to stay in their adoptive home if they've suffered abuse and neglect. I say that family who does it should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law and we should make sure the adoptee, who is the victim, is compensated fully as the enduring impacts should never be underestimated.

Now going through the legal and police processes myself, I can attest to how difficult it is for a vulnerable child who is abused and neglected to receive any financial compensation for the wrongs done to them under the guise of "adoption". We Australian adoptees were not allowed to participate in the Royal Commission as our adoptions legally render us as not being in "institutional" care, yet I will argue it is the State and authorities of the State who allowed, condoned, approved, and processed us as vulnerable children to be placed into their care in the same way that other state wards get placed in their alternative homes.

Australia needs to complete a full reckoning (eg. Royal Commission) into what you've done to the most vulnerable children in your society. Those of us adopted along with our state ward cohorts and of the Stolen Generation / Indigenous and Torres Strait islander groups, we have all been vulnerable and exposed to further abuse and neglect. Why does our government place acknowledge, fund and support those cohorts and yet not recognise intercountry adoptees are almost identical as a group to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups? We are akin to the Stolen Generation, often from indigenous and minority origins (usually non white), taken away without any say, placed into a racially different stranger families (usually white), expected to assimilate and be grateful for our existence, not expected to ask questions or wonder why we never feel we belong because we are surrounded by faces who don't mirror our own. Then when abuse and

neglect happens to us - we are told to be quiet and get on with it because "haven't we got a better life?!"

It is time Australia has a good hard honest look at what it's done in intercountry adoption (all adoption) and even more so, for those who have ended up being further victimised because they were placed in families who commit abuse and neglect.

Did you know about the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which helps young people when they leave Out of Home Care?

I had no idea it even existed until this consultation so cannot comment.

My Huong

What can be done to help intercountry adoptee children stay safe from Abuse & Neglect in their new adoptive homes?

This process should start prior to the child joining the adopted family unit.

I work in an orphanage in Vietnam, so therefore understand the process within the country before the child is adopted internationally. Despite my experiences, I can only speak of Vietnam and the way the orphanage where I work operates. Regardless of the prospective adoptive parents having gone through the approval process by adoption agencies within their own countries, I believe a case worker employed at the orphanage should be assigned to the family at the time of adoption when they come to collect their child. This case worker will therefore know the child well and their needs. This case worker's role would be to provide support to the baby/child and to the adoptive parents. This period should be for 3 to 4 weeks allowing the parents time to bond with the child whilst having support. The case worker would need to be a trained professional in the field of adoption as well as have a good understanding of western culture.

In Vietnam adopted parents are assigned a caseworker from the agency when they arrive in the country merely for assistance in doing paperwork and for translation. This person does not know the child, other than what is presented in the child's adoption file.

As a member of staff at the orphanage where I work, I took it upon myself to provide support to the adoptive parents when they came to collect their child. I suggested they remain in town for a few weeks allowing the child time to bond with them, whilst having my support at hand should they or the child needed it. This was not mandatory and some families chose to take the child to HCMC on the first day. Families that did choose to stay in Vung Tau, really appreciated that experience and felt they were given a lot more information on their child, felt they had more of a connection to the child's orphanage, had more opportunities to learn a little of Vietnamese culture and were more likely to remain in contact after the adoption process was finalized. Having this support for a child 12 months and older was very beneficial for the child who still had a familiar person to provide assurance and could speak the same language. In the case of older children this is particularly vital as they are placed with adoptive parents who they can not communicate with at all and have questions they would like answered. Often it isn't

until the child meets the adopted parents that it is a reality that they will no longer be living at the orphanage, but with a family. In general an older child needs to be better informed and have opportunities to ask questions once they have met their adopted parents.

I have provided this support to children and for those in the age range from 4 and over it made the adoption transition far easier for them. Several of the families adopting children 8 and over continued to call me once they had arrived in their country. This made the transition easier for the child as they then had further questions and a number of parents had issues around food choices for their child. These families too were more likely to foster a cultural awareness for their child and have support networks in place. Example, seeking friends with other children adopted from Vietnam, eating Vietnamese meals and some even sought to teach their child Vietnamese. Many of these families returned to Vietnam with their child to visit the orphanage and experience the culture in the country while visiting.

On 4 occasions in offering support to adoptive parents at the time of adoption, I clearly saw red flags. In 3 of the cases there was no connection between the child and adopted parents. The orphanage director has a right to stop the adoption, but this is a financially costly consequence for the orphanage. This should not be the case if this occurs. In the other instance the older adopted girl was adopted to France. Sadly, within months major issues arose within the family and the child ended up in the care of Social Services and was placed into another family. This in itself is very traumatic and damaging for the child. A member of staff from the orphanage connected with this particular girl and provided the counselling support she needed to get through it.

Adoption agencies in Vietnam are not standardised and work according to their own values/ideas. This process should be standardised for all adoption agencies both in the country of where the child is adopted from and internationally.

In general the adoption process needs to be far more strict. Prior to adoption prospective adoptive parents should be required to attend some form of course in which they complete a certain number of hours where they receive counselling and learn key issues surrounding intercountry adoption. Alongside this there should be a home study component where a case worker is assigned to visit and interview the parents in their own home setting. This is not to be merely a one off interview, but several in which the case

worker can have a better gauge of the home environment. At any stage the professional worker deems that the prospective parents are not suitable then this must be addressed.

Once the adoption process has been completed and the child is now in the family unit with the adopted parents, ongoing visits from the case-worker should be mandatory for an extended period, but with fewer visits as each year passes.

How was your experience of finding and using supports?

I was adopted to Australia in 1975 from Vietnam. At the time I was 5 years of age. My adopted father was working in Vietnam and simply paid a lawyer in Vietnam to do paperwork 10 days prior to my departure. The whole thing was illegally done. When I arrived in Australia he then sought a lawyer to process my adoption.

The family I was adopted into was very dysfunctional and I had no support from them. On one occasion I tried to talk to a doctor, but having my adoptive mother there with me, I was fearful and what I tried to raise was overlooked. This experience was very negative and damaging.

At the age of 13, when an adopted brother committed suicide I was told to see the school counsellor, but I refused to talk to her and nothing further was done.

At age 19 I told a doctor I was depressed and was then prescribed antidepressants.

What barriers did you face when trying to find or use supports?

Within 6 months my adopted parents had told me that my birth mother had died and that I was to forget about Vietnam. Hence, I never spoke about it again with them. I feared talking to anybody about my family problems and had nobody to turn to. Fear, having nobody to trust and not knowing who to turn to are significant barriers.

At the age of 15, I went to Social Services and told a worker there that I wanted to disown my parents. I was asked a few general questions, but was not given adequate advice or support.

How could the supports and services be made easier to find & use?

Speaking from my own experience I was fearful of my adopted family and had learnt to not trust anybody. So, even if I was able to access support, it is unlikely I would have as I was unable to trust anybody. While abuse occurs in all types of families, children are at a much greater risk in certain situations, particularly in families where there is drug abuse, domestic violence and mental illness. It is vital for school teachers to know what kind of home environment their students are living in as this can be a warning sign of abuse within the family. I displayed many warning signs, but they were never identified or addressed.

During the years I attended school there was far less awareness of recognising signs of child abuse. School teachers are the best placed adult to identify abuse as they see a child's behaviour on a daily basis. All schools today have procedures in place to respond to and report suspected child abuse.

It should be encouraged that a child sees a school counsellor, as there they are in a place away from parents and in a place the child feels safe.

How can the Govt work with services that help children and families who are vulnerable and disadvantaged?

To have good early intervention and prevention strategies in place is vital. I am not up on what is currently available in Australia to give much advice as I've been living in Vietnam for quite some years now. As a minimum, families who combine cultural and racial differences should engage in educational courses to best implement ways to understand how these issues impact their children and family. Provide practical parenting education.

How can those professionals learn the right skills to do their job?

Learn from the experiences of those that have been vulnerable/abused.

What supports and services can help children who have experienced Abuse & Neglect?

Free counselling services is a vital service.