

International adoption not as easy as stars make it look

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By Richard Klarberg President & CEO of Council on Accreditation

When celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna adopt children from desperately poor countries, they send a powerful message about the plight of these children and the need for inter-country adoption.

But they don't necessarily set a proper example. Although the number of foreign adoptions by American citizens has doubled over the last decade, from 11,340 to upwards of 22,000, most Americans do not have the means or the access of a celebrity. For them, inter-country adoptions can be a harrowing process.

Horror stories of babies being stolen from their birth mothers, parents buying -- or selling -- children, couples being swindled out of massive sums of money to adopt and a slew of other ethical issues and rumors associated with foreign adoptions have dashed countless hopes of prospective adoptive parents.

Any disincentive to international adoption is a tragedy. There are millions of children worldwide awaiting adoption, most living amid extreme poverty or social upheaval.

A recent UNICEF report finds that in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States alone, 1.5 million children are in out-of-home care -- an increase of 150,000 in the last decade. These children are primarily in institutions, with the rate of infant institutionalization increasing in many countries.

In Russia, the number of children left without parental care each year increased from 49,000 in 1989 to 114,000 in 1999, with the number of these children placed in institutional care increasing 3.5 times. UNICEF also found increases in the number of countries placing children up for adoption internationally.

Understanding the legalities of international adoptions is essential for parents considering adopting a child from a foreign country.

There are two main ways Americans can ensure they are adopting through legitimate channels.

First, they should adopt through an accredited adoption agency. Accredited agencies must go through an extensive evaluation process to prove that they can be trusted to implement the highest standards in adoption assistance. This includes disclosing full medical records of children ready for adoption and costs associated with adoption.

Second, Americans should try to adopt in countries that have ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, which commits signatories to ethical and transparent adoption procedures. The Hague Convention seeks to prevent abduction, exploitation, sale and trafficking of children, and to see that adoptive parents and birth mothers are treated ethically in the process. So far, 68 countries have signed on to the treaty.

Guatemala made headlines this month when it ratified an international adoption treaty to comply with the Hague Convention, committing the country's adoption practices to government regulation. Aside from China, more Americans adopt from Guatemala than from any other country.

The glare of public attention on high-profile adoptions in poor countries is raising awareness and demand for these children in America. This in turn has driven international adoption policy towards greater standardization and better practices through accreditation. That means for ordinary people, inter-country adoptions -- though not as easy as they are for celebrities -- don't have to be a nightmare.

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