# SUBMISSION

**on the**

# Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

**to the**

# Senate Community Affairs References Committee

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**By**

## A R M S

## Australian Relinquishing Mothers' Association

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Submission made under the following terms of reference:

a) the role, if any, of the Commonwealth Government, its policies and practices in contributing to forced adoptions; and

b) the potential role of the Commonwealth in developing a national framework to assist states and territories to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

*Five pages, including this cover page*

ARMS (Vic) is the Association of Relinquishing Mothers, which represents women throughout Australia who have lost their children to adoption. It began in 1982 after the second Adoption Conference in Adelaide and at that time ARMS organisations were set up in each State. ARMS is run by a committee of volunteers and is a self-help group which currently has over 300 members. It meets regularly to provide emotional support to women who have lost their child or children to adoption. We take any opportunity to inform the community about the lifelong effects of past adoption practices. In 2010 we organised community meetings in the regional towns of Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and Shepparton to provide information and support for women affected by adoption. These meetings were well attended by relinquishing parents, adoptive parents and adoptees. We have conducted phone-ins on Mothers' Days and we try to maintain a profile in the community by organising media coverage whenever possible.

As young and vulnerable women we found ourselves banished from our homes and communities because of a sense of shame. Governments, churches, schools and employers all played their part in separating and isolating us from our families, peers, partners and any support networks, reinforcing a sense of shame and the need for secrecy and causing severe emotional distress. Many of ARMS' members were admitted to Church and Government run "Homes", which were actually workhouses, where women were further abused.

During the birthing process, women were further isolated and separated, often with no knowledge of what to expect (no pre-natal classes). Many of ARMS' members have endured horrifying incidents during that vulnerable time of birthing, including:

- Being shackled or otherwise tied down.
- Pain relief was often denied
- Frequently told that they "must suffer for their sins".
- Mothers were denied even a glimpse of their newborn – screens and pillows were used to separate them.
- Babies were whisked away and other extreme measures were used to separate mother and child.
- Mothers have found out through medical records that they were drugged immediately following the birth so they "couldn't make trouble".
- Mothers often had their breasts tightly bound to suppress lactation, which was physically painful and caused the emotional anguish of not being able to nourish their baby. Of course, the baby also suffered from being denied its right to be breastfed.

Consent was often taken within the first five days after birth and drugs were used to keep women compliant. Mothers were told that their baby deserved to be with a properly married couple who could provide for it financially. Some were falsely told that their baby had not survived the birth. They were denied information about pensions that were available to single mothers. Since 1987, consent is not considered to be "informed" unless the natural mother has been told of the risks

(both physical and psychological) of placing their child for adoption.

Women were discharged with no post-natal care, no counselling, and no recognition of the enormity of the birth process - emotional, physical and spiritual and no advice except to "get on with your life". The consequences of such inhumane treatment were and are unresolved grief, depression and suicide. Disabling chronic grief reactions are similar to those of relatives of servicemen 'missing believed dead' (Condon 1986). Janette Logan (1996) in her research paper on birth mothers and mental health, cited a high incidence of mental health problems occurring in women who relinquished a child for adoption and suggested that depression was also a common outcome.

The grief of natural mothers who have lost a child to adoption has never been fully recognised by society, but especially not by professionals such as social workers, doctors and psychologists (Robinson 2000). Natural mothers and adoptees are over represented in mental health institutions, jails and rehabilitation centres dealing with drug and alcohol abuse. A paper presented at the Adoption conference in Sydney (Gair 2008) stated that "Many birthmothers have revealed mental health issues related to adoption, with trauma and grief increasing rather than decreasing over time." Crowell (2007) stated that 82 per cent of mothers suffered depression after relinquishing their child to adoption. Wells (1993a and b) and Gair (2008) find that the grief does not diminish, but in fact intensifies and is part of the "…prolonged and profound consequences of surrender".

Diminished self esteem, abandonment of previous life goals, such as interruption to education, post traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, nightmares, and anxiety and phobic reactions were experienced by a number of natural mothers with ongoing serious consequences for development of their full potential as human beings. A lack of government policies and support post adoption has created a large group of dysfunctional people. One of our mothers at a recent meeting mentioned that she has lost a sense of trust in both herself and in other people through losing her child to adoption.

Gair (2008) notes that unexplained secondary infertility is another symptom of the loss of a first child to adoption. Many of our members never went on to have another child. For women who did go on to marry and have other children, the recommended utter secrecy surrounding the fact of their firstborn contributed to shame, self punishment and depression. Many were unable to tell subsequent children and family about the existence of a sibling, niece, nephew or grandchild. Van Kepple, Midford and Ciccine state "… their grief has been cruelly exacerbated by the longstanding conspiracy of silence which surrounded adoption practice".

There are certain rituals and behaviours associated with grief and loss, such as flowers, condolence telephone calls, cards and visits. There are discussions and reminiscences about the person gone. Assistance is offered and a gathering arranged to farewell and to comfort the relatives of the person. These rituals help the bereaved come to terms with their loss. For natural mothers none of those important rituals occurred to help ease the pain of their loss. Grief that is not openly

acknowledged, socially supported or publicly mourned has been termed disenfranchised grief (Robinson 2000).

We have for many years requested that the Victorian adoption records be opened so that natural parents, siblings and grandparents can obtain identifying information about the child they lost through adoption. Condon 1986 discovered that natural parents "perceive their efforts to acquire knowledge about their child … as being blocked by an uncaring bureaucracy".

We signed consent forms (often under duress) which gave the adoptive parents the legal right to raise our children. We never agreed to be excluded from identifying information about our children, whether they were alive or dead. At a support meeting one mother disclosed that the child she lost to adoption had died at the age of six. This very distressed woman had been hoping for thirty years to meet her child.

Our very existence was legally obliterated by the issuing of what were in fact false birth certificates. The only true facts were the date and place of birth. The names we bestowed on our children were overwhelmingly changed – a further negation of our place in their lives and the rights of our children to maintain a connection with their natural parents. UNICEF is working towards an international law which would make it an abuse of a child to change its name without the informed consent of the child itself. They foresee a time when the law will "… ensure that a child's kinship, name and identity is retained and … Provide legal protection against changing a child's name, unless requested by the child…" Loening-Voysey.

We believe "...that adoption is a violent act, a political act of aggression towards a woman who has supposedly offended the sexual mores by committing the unforgivable act of not suppressing her sexuality, and therefore not keeping it for trading purposes through traditional marriage … the crime is a grave one … the penalty is severe. She is stripped of her child by a variety of subtle and not so subtle manoeuvres and then brutally abandoned …" *Shawyer. 1979*

Governments have created adoption policies and practices so are responsible for the consequences of those policies and practices. ARMS would like the Commonwealth Government to address our concerns by taking the following actions:

- offering an apology (as the State Government in Western Australia did on 19th October 2010) to natural mothers for the government practices which separated mothers from their babies, simply because they were unmarried.
- providing funding for ongoing counselling services and support groups. influencing the State Government in Victoria to pass legislation to enable natural mothers equal access to identifying information.

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