



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Joint Committee on Human Rights

Oral evidence: [The right to family life: the adoption of children of unmarried women 1949-76, HC 748](#)

Wednesday 16 March 2022

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Members present: Harriet Harman MP (The Chair); Lord Brabazon of Tara; Lord Dubs; Florence Eshalomi MP; Lord Henley; Baroness Massey of Darwen; David Simmonds MP; Lord Singh of Wimbledon.

Questions 18 - 24

Witness

[II](#): Liz Harvie.



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Examination of witness

Liz Harvie.

Q18 The Chair: We now move to the second part of our evidence session where we will hear from Liz Harvie. If you would like to take a seat at the table, Liz. Ann and Judy, you are welcome to stay and hear what Liz has to say in evidence to us. Thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence to us, Liz. You were born in 1974 to an unmarried mother, and you were adopted at eight weeks old. You felt that being separated from your birth mother inflicted a trauma on you that has carried through to the present day. You reunited with both your birth parents in your late twenties. You are only one of hundreds of thousands of people who were brought up under this adoption situation, not with their families because the mother was unmarried. How has it affected you? What was your situation?

Liz Harvie: Thank you for having me here today. I am referring to my notes because I do not want to forget anything. It is an emotive subject for me to talk about, and I am representing thousands of adoptees, so I do not want to miss anything out, so excuse me if I look down.

First, a bit about my childhood. I was born in 1974 at a maternity hospital in Northampton, England. I stayed there with my birth mother for 10 days, as I gather was the norm, when I was removed from her and put into a foster home. At the age of eight weeks, I was adopted into a family 60 miles away, and I lived with a younger brother who came along two years later and was also adopted. We lived in a nice house. We took piano lessons, swimming lessons. We went to the zoo. We went to concerts. We wanted for nothing. Life was good, but, as an adoptee, I always felt that something was missing. I did not know any other adoptees growing up, and I sometimes felt quite alone. Nobody came to check on me. Nobody came from any agencies or from anywhere to see how I was doing, how I was processing what I was feeling so I stuffed it down and thought that there was something wrong with me.

It is only in the last year or so that I have connected with other adult adoptees via the social media platform Twitter and, in sharing experiences between us, it is only now that I have been able to feel seen and heard and understood. Being adopted is such a surreal experience. Being separated from your mother is one of the most terrible things that can happen to you, not to know why or even if she is alive or dead, yet you are not permitted to grieve for her or to have feelings about this. We perpetually, as adoptees, play the role of the grateful adoptee. We keep the peace, and we are conditioned to try not to upset anyone.

Q19 Lord Brabazon of Tara: Thank you very much for coming to give us evidence. Can you tell us when you first discovered that you were adopted? Were you told by somebody that you were adopted and were you told anything about your birth mother and the reasons for your

adoption?

Liz Harvie: I do not remember being told that I was adopted. I think I was about two years old when a heavily pregnant friend was visiting the house of my mother and my mother said, "Oh, look, Auntie June has a baby in her tummy". As I was only about two, I, of course, promptly went over and lifted her dress to see said baby and my mother told me years later that she took the opportunity to say to me then, "You did not come out of my tummy. You came out of another lady's tummy, but I am your mummy". So that was the first time, even though I do not recall it. I have always known, and it was my normal, but inside I felt a bit alone, a bit lost, and I was always wondering what I had done to be given up by my parents. As a child, I thought I was not wanted, and that did not feel very nice. When I was older, I used to often ask many questions to my adoptive parents. I was just so curious as I was the kind of child who loved to be able to have an answer and an explanation for everything and to question why I was given away but there were never enough answers for me.

My parents told me that my birth mother was very young when she had me. She was 20 and she was not married, so it was thought that I would be better off with people who were able to look after me because she could not. I remember that story being told to me several times because that is how often I asked for the information, and it was still never enough. Yet my parents thought I was too young to be given my adoption records, and maybe they were right. I was around 16 when my parents finally decided that I was mature enough and ready to see those records and I will never forget that moment. There was a lot of paperwork. I saw my birth mother's name for the first time, my birth father's name, and their parents' names and, most oddly for me, the name I was given at birth. It was like I was discovering a different person. This person lived somewhere else with a different name. Who was she? Did she share my hobbies, my interests? Did she play the piano or speak French like me? Then I realised she was me. It was all a bit too much to take in, but I am glad I was finally allowed access to my history although it left me with more questions than answers.

Lord Brabazon of Tara: Thank you.

Q20 **Florence Eshalomi:** Good afternoon to you. I am a Member of the House of Commons representing Vauxhall. Thank you so much, Liz, for sharing your personal story, and I know this must be difficult for you. You have touched on some of the experience of your birth mother, but what else could you tell us about your birth mother's experience of being an unmarried mother and your subsequent adoption?

Liz Harvie: First, I want to make it very clear that, although I have been in reunion with my birth mother, Yvonne, for 20 years since I was 28, I am 48 now, and she has spoken with me as much as she could about her experiences and the way we had to part company, I feel that I can never do her justice in telling everyone here her story. It is very much owned

by her, but I have her permission and blessing to share a small part of her story with you now as she cannot be here in person today.

When 20-year-old Yvonne had just given birth to me in the maternity home, the midwife cooed over me and exclaimed brightly, "You've got a beautiful baby girl." Yvonne started crying. The midwife had obviously not read her notes, went off to do so and announced, "Oh, this baby is flagged for adoption," and simply left the room. Yvonne required stitches after giving birth to me, yet she was left to wait alone for hours in a room with her legs still in stirrups, and when the stitches were finally given, it was with no pain relief. Then, when I, her baby, was finally brought back into the room, the bassinet was deliberately left on the other side of the room from Yvonne with me in it, far out of her reach. Then one day, Yvonne was changing my nappy and getting me dressed as usual when a social worker came into the room and said, "I have come for Claire".

That was my birth name. Yvonne knew that this day would come but she was shocked as she had not been told that I was being taken away that day. Yvonne said, "I am not quite ready. I am just getting her dressed". Yvonne was told, "Give the baby to me while you finish what you're doing, and I'll give her back to you for one last cuddle". Yvonne handed me to the social worker who then began to leave the room with me when Yvonne said, "Please wait. I have not had my last cuddle yet". The social worker then told her "This baby is no longer anything to do with you" and left. She showed my mother no empathy, no tenderness, no compassion. Yvonne was left alone in a heap of tears. Yvonne tells me she cannot remember what happened next. In my opinion, her traumatised brain will not allow her to recall what happened after I was taken away and she left the maternity hospital soon after, empty handed without what she had wanted to keep all along: her baby.

You wanted me to talk a little about being an adoptee. When you grow up as an adoptee, you have no genetic mirror of who you are. You create a false sense of self. You try to fit in with a family who does not look like you, who does not act like you, yet you feel obliged to be like in some way. This is very confusing for an adoptee. The seven core issues of adoption are loss, rejection, guilt or shame, grief, identity, intimacy and control. While every adoption story is different, the one thing to remember is there is no adoption without loss. Experts consider separation from birth parents, even as an infant, as a traumatic event. Therefore, every adopted child experiences early trauma in at least one of those forms.

The Chair: Thank you.

Q21 Lord Singh of Wimbledon: I am a Cross-Bench Member of the House of Lords. Liz, you have told us, in very moving terms, about your experiences. How have these experiences affected your right to family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights as we know it today?

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Liz Harvie: I feel that, for many involved in forced adoption, the right to family life was simply not honoured. Instead of attempting family preservation, I feel that many groups were in collusion with each other to carry out these forced adoptions. It seemed that back then that, if you were a young, unmarried mother, you were deemed unfit to keep your baby. You were treated terribly, and adoption was offered up as the only remedy to prevent bringing disgrace on your family and society. All rights were taken away from these young women. Some were hidden away in mother and baby homes. Many of them have never recovered from the trauma.

Q22 **Angela Richardson:** You talked about the moment when you were 16 and you saw your birth certificate, the names of your parents, your name and you said you have been in touch with your mother for 20 years. Have you been able to trace family members, and can you tell us what that experience has been like for you?

Liz Harvie: Yes, I have. I started my search as soon as I turned 18. I added my details to the adoption contact register, and I contacted the Church of England Children's Society, which handled my adoption. I remember it not being an easy process, but I received a letter from them one day telling me that there was a contact match as my birth mother had also registered herself as wanting to make contact with me. At first, we shared letters, then photos. Then, when I was 28, we finally met.

I can barely find the words to tell you what that felt like, seeing my birth mother in front of my own eyes, sorry, just give me a minute, after wondering my whole life what she would look like. I remember looking at her hands a lot. I find hands so personal. She has my eyes, my lips, and she is the same build as me. We share the same sense of humour. We are both silly. We find the same things funny. I felt like I had come home. I met my birth father a few months later and discovered, to my great surprise, that I am the eldest of five siblings. I share my birth father's ears. We have the same jawline. We both trained in aromatherapy. We like doing things with our hands. I met my half-sister, on my birth father's side, on the same day. We look so alike. If you put a photo of us next to each other, you can tell we are sisters. Yet we were denied the chance to know each other. I love my adopted brother dearly, but I always wanted a sister. It turns out I had two, and I did not even know it. Three half-brothers and two half-sisters and I lived all my life not being able to have the chance to grow up knowing them all.

Q23 **Lord Henley:** I am a Conservative Member of the House of Lords. Despite the age of many of us on the committee, I think many of us are quite surprised that we are talking about such very different attitudes in the 1950s, 1960s but even on into the time you were adopted in the 1970s. What I would be interested to know, and obviously you can only speak from your personal experience from the 1970s onwards, but, from your meetings with others, how do you think your experiences reflect those of the people who were adopted in the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s and the changes that happened?

Liz Harvie: I know from meeting other adoptees online and in various peer support groups online that many of us share the same feelings about our adoptions and the way they came about and the way they were handled. Many of us suffer from some form of trauma that shows itself in various ways. Yet the underlying theme of maternal separation, that very “primal wound”, as in the book by Nancy Verrier that Ann referred to, that we all share is there.

Q24 **The Chair:** Obviously, we cannot turn back the clock, although goodness knows, I wish we could, but what could be done now to better support people? Do you think there should be an apology and what difference would that make? What should happen now? You are obviously doing a great deal to support each other, but is there anything that we should be proposing in our report?

Liz Harvie: I know that I speak for much of our community, for all those who have been affected by forced adoption. After offering my community on Twitter to share their views and opinions with me, I have collated some of their thoughts on what should happen now to present to you here today. First, education for prospective and current adopters. I know this is done to an extent already, but please, adoption agencies, listen to us, put us out there. We are the experts on lived adoption. We live the experience. We can tell you things you cannot get from a book, but might I suggest that going forward you remunerate us for our time and emotional expenditure, please.

The second important thing is access to our medical history and our records. All adult adoptees should have full access to their adoption agency records. Not only is it demeaning and embarrassing when frequently asked at various points in our lives what our medical history is and we have to answer, “Unknown due to adoption”, it is our heritage, our history and our health at stake. In fact, five years ago, at the age of 43, I discovered that I have acquired a genetically inherited condition from my birth mother which I have in turn passed on to my own children. If I, or my adoptive parents, had been given access to my birth family's medical history from the start, my own condition would have been picked up earlier in my life. Instead, it was discovered too late for me to have been able to manage it properly and when my own daughters were already aged 13 and 10. Adult adoptees should be given access to free medical checks and DNA testing to avoid any of this.

Thirdly, no more secrets. All adoptees should be told that they are adopted, even retrospectively, to avoid late discovery. Sadly, there are many adoptees in our community who were told lies about their adoption, who found out by chance or were simply never told. My next point is support in order to reconnect with our biological families. We need to make sure that our future adoptees are told the truth and that they are given the space to grieve and never guilted into gratitude, that they are supported in searching for and connecting to their identity and biological family with the help of intermediary services whilst being given full counselling support.

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The opportunity to revoke or annul historic forced adoptions is my next point. Although not my personal wish, many adoptees have shared with me that they would welcome the opportunity to revoke and annul their adoption now that they are an adult. Some want to reinstate their birth name. They are upset and angry that something was done to them, decided for them, when they were unable to give consent, something that changed the path of their life journey, their life story, and which has affected them every day of their lives. This is the depth of feeling from some of our community. This is how deep the trauma runs.

On the subject of trauma, I would like to speak about an important topic among our community, and that is the availability of and access to trauma informed adoptee competent therapy. Currently, the UK Government's Department for Education is regulating, and therefore restricting, access to therapy and counselling services for adopted adults. In order to be able to discuss adoption as a counsellor, you must undergo specific training to become Ofsted registered. This is a costly, prohibitive and restrictive process, and many counsellors are putting off going through it. Therapists who are not Ofsted registered and treating adoptees are required to terminate their support, to withdraw it, if they later find out that someone they are treating is adopted and wants to discuss it.

This is terribly damaging, particularly for an adopted person who may already struggle with rejection, trust and making attachments. I understand that it is wholly right to protect under 21s with this legislation, but why adults are included in this law makes no sense. We were adopted as babies and children, but we are not children and should not be governed by laws created for them. In fact, it is often in adulthood, and at significant points later in the life of an adoptee, that issues arise. For example, giving birth to our own children caused me particular trauma. I will not go into all these here, but may I refer to a research paper published in 1982 by Silverstein and Kaplan called the *Lifelong Issues in Adoption*. Also, finding one such competent therapist is a geographical lottery. There are only six adoption informed Ofsted registered counsellors stretching from Birmingham to the Scottish Borders.

In summary, these regulations are leaving adoptees with nowhere to turn, and their mental health is suffering greatly. Some are self-harming, some have suicidal ideation, and some are even choosing to end their lives because they are unable to access the right help for their trauma. Instead of being regulated by the Department for Education and carried out by Ofsted, please let the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy experts take over and help adopted adults and birth relatives to get the help we need and facilitate us to be able to choose a counsellor who we feel comfortable with. In addition, many in our community have suggested that mental health therapy should be given for free for as long as we need it.

The Government have recently announced that they are investing £160 million in funding to promote and support adoption. This investment pledges to "Provide additional support, including cognitive therapy, family support sessions and activities to help children recover from earlier traumas, helping them settle into their new families and homes. Some of this funding will be given to regional adoption agencies and to post adoption support". However, we are yet to learn if this funding will be extended to include help and support for adult adoptees.

Lastly, Harriet, you mentioned an apology. People may ask what an apology will achieve after all this time as it was so long ago. I would very much welcome an apology to be given to the birth mothers, the birth fathers, to the adoptees, once babies now fully grown adults, even to the children of adoptees who are still affected by that forced missing link in their ancestral line. Please, an apology to all of us. We are sorry, but we want those words to carry the recognition of our trauma, our distress, our sadness, our grief, which, even though decades old, is still very raw and painful to us.

An apology, please, to the birth mothers for the shameful practices of the time that led to unmarried young mothers being coerced into having their babies taken from them and them being treated without respect or dignity by many maternity nurses, medical practitioners, social workers and other social or religious institutions they came into contact with. An apology, please, for the societal stigma, for the inadequate, even hidden, levels of welfare support, for the shame and degradation these young, vulnerable mothers endured when told that their baby would be better off with proper parents. These birth mothers are now in their later years, and many of them feel it is simply too late to start trauma therapy but, please, give them the apology they deserve so they can at least have some peace.

An apology, please, to we adoptees who began our young lives from a place of trauma, many of us before we were even born, being exposed in the womb to our mother's stress and desperation at her situation. An apology for the recalled, yet not remembered, comfort of our first mother that was taken from us. Even in the womb we knew the sound of her laughter, the tone of her voice, the sound of her heartbeat, the sway of her body as we moved as one for nine whole months. An apology for that being taken away from us and being replaced with a different voice, laugh, smell of a foster mother, then another mother.

An apology, please, for the loss of our heritage, for the confusion over our identity, for the lifelong quest for who we really are. An apology for the inadequate, non-existent follow up of we adoptees by social services or adoption agencies. We were simply taken, placed and left with no help or support. We were vulnerable babies, children and now we are adults who are still looking for that help and support.

The crucial thing I would like people to recognise is that before there can be an adoption, there must be a relinquishment. Paul Sunderland, who is

an addiction psychotherapist and expert in the early psychological wounds of adoption, said that adoption is "The only condition that doesn't really describe what happened". What we are actually talking about in this inquiry is forced relinquishment, forced to give up, give away, your baby. It makes it sound even worse now, doesn't it?

To conclude, sorry is such a small word and it is already too late for some birth mothers and adoptees, but we would all appreciate the chance for a small bit of peace on our healing journeys. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Liz, for that extremely powerful and very thoughtful evidence that will play a very important role as we consider our recommendations. With that, I conclude this evidence session.