

Adopting abroad

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Former MP Oona King reveals her own struggle to adopt a foreign baby, and the terrible suffering she witnessed in the Congo

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Earlier this year I stood in the dusty doorway of an African orphanage in the Congo, rage consuming me as I watched two babies moan in pain. They were covered in flies and filth, misery etched on their faces. Their eyes were sealed with mucus. Tiny stick arms hung limply over distended stomachs.

For these children, there was no chance of adoption, let alone a new home with celebrity millionaires. Less than 100 yards away was the room they would move to within the next fortnight. The mortuary.

I have been visiting Rwanda, the Congo and their destitute children for nearly a decade now. My former job as a Member of Parliament often took me to war-torn corners of the world and, over time, I developed a special interest in the Great Lakes region of Africa and its struggle to recover from the genocide of 1994.

I still go there in my new role as a writer and campaigner, and it was an attempt to raise awareness of the humanitarian disaster taking place that had taken me back on this occasion.

As someone of African descent, I have always felt a connection with that part of the world. But there was an even more personal reason for visiting these orphanages over the years - I had long wanted to start a family of my own and adopting from a children's home like this one in the Congo would have been the perfect solution.

In the end, it was not to be. The bureaucracy involved was overwhelming, as was the cost. Like countless others in my situation, I eventually conceded defeat.

The coverage of Madonna's attempt to adopt 13-month-old David Banda has brought these heart-wrenching visits very much back to mind - along with a sense of anger that so many thousands of African children remain in desperate need of help, even though there are British families only too willing to embrace them.

Little David's community lives cheek-by-jowl with poverty and disease. His two older brothers are already dead. Yet even now the criticisms are flying thick and fast, although the truth about the extraordinary events of the past few weeks remains unclear.

Madonna is accused of 'purchasing' a child in contravention of Malawi's normal rules, 'stealing' him away from his heritage. It is a charge she denies absolutely but the very idea of adoption from abroad has been attacked.

Having trodden the same path as Madonna and her husband Guy Ritchie, I beg to differ.

Yes, there are questions about how this fits with their celebrity lifestyle. But given the scale of the misery I have seen in countries such as Malawi as well as the Congo, I am convinced that it should be made far easier for overseas adoption to go ahead, not harder as some suggest.

It is nearly a decade since I first started to think about having a child of my own. I had met my husband Tiberio, a media executive, when we were both working in Brussels and in 1994 we married.

Tiberio was always family minded in that typically Italian way. He came from an extensive clan in Naples and he looked forward as much as me - sometimes more than me - to starting his own family. At first I assumed motherhood would happen naturally - he was 31, I was 26. When I finally became pregnant in 2000 I was delighted. Even though it resulted in a miscarriage, I was grateful that I could at least get pregnant naturally, and I assumed it would happen again. It didn't. I signed up for IVF but despite five attempts - including three full cycles - it proved fruitless and demoralising.

The expense was incalculable and the process was traumatic, a hellish big dipper of emotions made worse because the doctors insisted I was the perfect candidate with the maximum chance of success. Time after time something went wrong and we had to start again.

So by 2003, when I was a Labour MP for the East End constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow, I felt that it was adoption or nothing.

My first thought was to look abroad and, in particular, to Africa. If I was going to find a child it made sense to adopt one in

the greatest need. I loved the idea of nurturing a relationship between my baby and its birth-country because I felt this was part of my own heritage too.

But adoption from the Congo and neighbouring Rwanda proved near impossible. Neither country had signed an adoption treaty with Britain, so there were no systems in place. After extensive research, I concluded there was no reliable source of help or advice and no way of establishing even the most basic information about the children I might hope to adopt.

Moreover, the British authorities charged steep fees for vetting prospective parents. The 'price' of adoption had never occurred to me before. The home assessment is free if you adopt a British child but it costs at least £3,000 if you want to adopt from abroad and that comes on top of flights, legal costs and other charges that can range from £5,000 to £35,000.

There is nothing like fertility treatment to destroy your finances - and there is nothing quite like pricing up babies to destroy your spirit.

Some couples adopt from America where, for a variety of cultural and legal reasons, newborn babies are more readily available than in the UK. American children often have a price tag of about £30,000, which includes agency fees, expenses and legal documents. When I said I couldn't afford that, I was told that black babies were a bit cheaper.

My first reaction was absolute outrage. My second reaction was 'how much cheaper?' But the £5,000 racism discount still left African-American babies beyond our price range.

Of course, foreign adoption will not solve the deep-rooted problems facing the developing world. But it seems strange that it is increasingly viewed as a part of their difficulties. It is actually frowned upon. Overseas adoption is so rare in Britain that it amounts to less than a trickle - fewer than 400 children in 1994, compared with several thousand in France and Germany. Many prospective adopters simply give up.

By 2003, we had realised we were getting nowhere and decided to look for a child in Britain instead. After all, children here need parents too and I hoped there would be a bit more help and guidance available, even if the rules were likely to be strict. But I was in for a shock.

Yet again I was confronted with a mountain of bureaucracy, but this time - initially at least - mixed with a political correctness that would be laughable were the results not so distressing.

At one point I was told there was a 'problem' with my application because I described myself as mixed-race. "We don't use that term," explained the white social worker, on the advice of a black social worker. "These days you are called dual heritage."

Then there was the official who told me I was not suitable to be an adoptive parent because I was an MP. When I pointed out that other politicians had adopted children, I was told bluntly that 'they were men. They had a wife at home'.

Over the years, I have seen potentially wonderful parents deterred or rejected by social workers who, despite the best intentions, were either misguided or plain incompetent.

One mixed-race couple in London was declared unfit to adopt a British mixed-race child because their six-year-old daughter did not know what a swastika was. This was cause for concern, they were told, because the mother and daughter walked past graffiti on the way to school and the mother had not taken the time to explain the significance of the symbol.

I was angered by the ridiculous claim that my life as an MP meant I could not be a mother and was determined to put up a fight. However, in the 2005 Election I found my seat challenged by George Galloway, who was standing as an anti-war candidate. I decided that no sane individual would choose to have Social Services and Galloway on their back at the same time. "If you lose the Election," said the social worker, 'come back to us.'

I didn't fail on purpose. In fact I worked night and day and lost by only 800 votes. The result, professionally speaking, left me devastated, not to mention unemployed. Yet this political disaster also gave me more time to concentrate on starting a family and, despite the heartache of the Election, my story has turned out to be a happy one.

After yet more hours of meetings and negotiations, and thanks in part to the most enormous slice of good fortune, I find myself the mother of a delightful baby boy.

My child arrived on a sunny day three months ago - or, rather, that is when we drove to meet him for the first time. It was the happiest moment of my life. I loved every second of the journey to the foster home with a white picket fence where 13-month-old Ilya lived. As we turned the corner into his street I felt I was on gas and air. Tiberio was amazed to fall instantly in love with our son. I expected nothing less.

It was not fame or money that brought us our beautiful boy, it was our genes. In my view, Social Services put too high a premium on colour and are restrictive in their insistence on finding the right ethnic match. Black children must go to black families, Asian children to Asian families and so on.

Perversely, despite my reservations, the emphasis on ethnic matching worked in our favour thanks to the diligence of half a dozen social workers to whom I am forever grateful. A child of mixed African-European descent had been identified in Essex. Because this was a similar mix to us as a couple, we went to the front of the queue.

I have some experience of the confusion that 'dual heritage' families can create. My father was African-American, from Georgia in the US; my mother was a white Geordie. So no one ever thought I was my mother's daughter. Although we have similar features, they never saw past our different colours. It can be difficult, but my mum always told me to thank my lucky stars I had nice brown legs that didn't go a motley blue in the cold.

There are pitfalls ahead for any adoptive family, and mine will be no different. But already I have gained immeasurably from Ilya, who has saved me from a life I did not want.

He makes me laugh all the time. Even when he throws his food on the floor or hides my keys in the washing machine, he's still the best thing in my world. I don't even mind when other mums say: "Well done - you've nearly lost all that weight from your pregnancy."

In fact the past few months have strengthened my determination to adopt from Africa and when my family is ready I will renew my attempt to overcome the obstacles.

One of these is the climate of criticism against trans-racial and international adoption. My views are frequently opposed, particularly by some in the black community. It is said, for example, that I should be concentrating on the bigger issues - the grinding hardship and the lack of a fair trade structure.

Well, yes, it is true that many black people, including myself, are descended from slaves. But poverty remains the biggest issue for David Banda's family, much of it is caused by patterns of inequality that date from colonialism. But when I see black people who would rather a black baby died than be brought up by a white family in the UK, I also see how much racism still cripples our capacity for sound judgment.

We would not even be thinking about the countless African orphans but for Madonna's intervention. Inter-country adoption should not be the preserve of the well-off or the famous. To see it as no more than a celebrity fad is a tragedy for everyone. For thousands of destitute children it is a matter of life and death.