

BIRTH MOTHERS' EXPERIENCE AFTER RELINQUISHMENT

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ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

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Birth Mothers' Experience after Relinquishment

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgment	6
Abstract	7
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	8
Background	8
Statement of the Problem	9
Research Question.....	11
Research Objective.....	11
Significance of the Study	11
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW LITERATURE	13
Inter-Country Adoption.....	13
Models of Placement and Birth Mothers' Relinquishment Experience.....	15
Birth Mothers and Their Decision to Relinquish	17
Feelings of Birth Mothers' after Relinquishment	18
Coping with Feelings Associated with Relinquishment	20
Theoretical Orientation	22
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHOD.....	24
Research Design.....	24
Study Site	24
Study Participants.....	25
Data Collection Procedure	25
Data Collection Tool	26
Ethical Consideration	27
Data Analysis Procedure	27
Limitations of the study.....	28

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	29
Demographic background	29
Relinquishment history	30
Why do Birth Mothers relinquish their Children?	30
Feelings of Birth Mothers after Relinquishment.....	36
Factors that Evoke Birth Mothers' Relinquishment Experience.....	42
Coping Mechanism	45
Struggling to Keep Going	48
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	49
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY	55
Conclusion.....	55
Implication of the study.....	56
Implication for social work practice.....	56
Implication for further research.....	59
Implication for social policy	59
References	61
Appendixes:	
Appendix A: Informed Consent for participants	66
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Birth Mothers	67
Appendix C: Interview Guide for Key Informants	69
Appendix D: Amharic Translation of the Informed Consent.....	70
Appendix E: Amharic translation of the Interview Guide for Birth Mothers	71
Appendix F: Amharic Translation of the Interview Guide for Key informants.....	73

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Abstract

Birth mothers in Ethiopia are too often invisible and their experience is left unexplored which prompted the need to carry out this research. Hence, this study aimed at understanding feelings and experiences of birth mothers who relinquished, in Addis Ababa. It used qualitative research method with case study being the strategy of inquiry to achieve this objective. It employed in-depth interview with five purposely selected participants. The findings of the study indicated that the birth mothers are experiencing regret, anger, fear, grief and intrusive thoughts. The finding also revealed that the pain of relinquishment is evoked in cases of events such as holidays and birthdays, and when birth mothers encounter discrimination from the society. The adjustment to the pain is however determined by birth mothers perceived degree of participation in the decision to relinquish, by the available contact with their children or adoptive parents and the social support they get. Participants used different coping strategies which include acceptance, “talking”, helping others, concealing feelings, withdrawing and spirituality. The finding of this research calls the attention of social workers both in providing birth mothers counseling services and advocating for them. The finding also calls for the attention of policy advocacy and further research in the area. Further research could be conducted on the experience of birth mothers who get married and have subsequent children after they have relinquished and also on the experience of birth fathers who relinquished.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The attachment between a mother and a child begins during pregnancy and continues to develop after birth as a physical and emotional closeness (Carney& Buttell, 2008, p.207). This attachment between mothers and their children is a reciprocal and ongoing relationship (McGinn, 2006, p.64). Hence, separation or breaking the bond affects both the child and the mother.

Adoption, which is referred as separation of mothers and their children as a result of relinquishment is an instance where the attachment between a mother and her child breaks. In Ethiopia, adoption more specifically inter-country adoption rates has increased from 91 children in the year 2000 to 2520 children in the year 2007(Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2008-2010). The rate is still increasing each year which may indicate that there are more mothers each year who relinquish their child for adoption.

Birth mothers experience the separation from their children, relinquishment, differently. They may feel an unbearable loss, guilt, shame and depression (Kelly, 2005. P.23). Issues like lack of knowledge about the wellbeing of the child and confidentiality on the original documents results on birth mothers having a reunion fantasies (which makes saying goodbye hard). They will also have intrusive thoughts that their child is unhappy or sick and they think that there is an uncaring bureaucracy which does not respond to their need for information about their child (Condon, 1986, p. 117).

In Ethiopia the experience of birth mothers was left unexplored. This was evident in the fact that there was no research found that studied birth mothers who relinquished their

children for adoption. Hence, this study aimed at exploring birth mothers experience and the impact of relinquishment on the birth mothers.

Statement of the Problem

Birth mothers' decide to relinquish their children for different reasons. However, poverty is the major reason for many birth mothers (Matsumura &Roby, 2002 p. 17). Other than poverty some birth mothers make their decision for reasons related with health issues especially HIV/AIDS and some say they are not emotionally ready to be a parent (Moore & Davidson, 2002, p.31). Others are worried of a stigma associated with a child born out of wedlock or are forced by their family members (Matsumura &Roby, 2002 p. 19-22). There are also instances where birth mothers relinquish their parental rights because of a reason related with single parenting. Others may also have reasons different from what is mentioned above like a child born from incest and rape (Resnick, 1984 P.6)

Most birth mothers decide to relinquish their children for adoption believing that it is the best thing for their child and for themselves. However, after they made their decision and their child is adopted, they suffer with the need to make peace with their decision and their need to move on (Robinson, 2001, p. ii). Birth mothers experience after relinquishment often includes signs of unresolved grief, diminished self-esteem, shame and self-condemnation, unexplained secondary infertility and others. (Jones, 1993 as cited in Kelly, 2005. P. 27)

Placing a child for adoption may also raise identity question in the minds of the birth mothers (Monica, n.d p.269). After relinquishment birth mothers play no role in the upbringing of their children. Hence, they would have a challenge addressing themselves as a mother when they do not have their children. This challenge does not stop even when they bear another child after their relinquishment. In fact, mothers experience increased feelings of guilt and regret after such instances (Condon, 1986, p.118).

In the case of Ethiopia many birth mothers are relinquishing their children for adoption and this is evident in the increased cases of Inter- Country Adoption (ICA) in the country from 2000 to 2520 children in the year 2007 only (Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2008-2010). In the mean time the effectiveness of service provided by adoption agencies in the country is in question for adoption agencies are inclining to work for profit other than their initial goal of helping orphan and vulnerable children (Bauer, 2008). There is also a high tendency of child trafficking to meet the demands for children from western adoptive parents (Triseliotis, 2000. P. 45).

Despite the increase in ICA, limited researches were conducted in the area with only one research (Brittingham, 2010) trying to look at the perspective of birth families in Ethiopia. It tried to explain why birth families choose to place their children in ICA and the challenges they face when they choose local alternatives. But it did not elaborate on the emotional experience of mothers who relinquished their children for adoption.

This gap on the literature was identified as a rationale for conducting this study. Consequently, this study aimed at understanding the factors that influence birth mothers' decision to relinquish in Ethiopia and the feelings of birth mothers after relinquishment. It also sought to understand birth mothers coping mechanism.

Research Question

What is the experience of birth mothers who relinquish their children for adoption?

Sub questions.

1. Why do birth mothers decide to relinquish their children for adoption?
2. What do birth mothers feel after relinquishing their children for adoption?
3. How do birth mothers cope with the after effects of relinquishing?

Research Objective

The general objective of the research was to explore the experience of birth mothers who relinquish their children for adoption. The specific objective includes;

1. To identify the issues influencing birth mothers' decision of relinquishing their children.
2. To explore the feelings of birth mothers after relinquishing their children for Adoption.
3. To examine how birth mothers cope with the impacts of relinquishing a child for adoption.

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to inform impacts of relinquishment on the wellbeing of birth mothers. Hence, it will contribute to social work intervention on the areas of advocacy, counseling and others. It also informs the need to address mothers who have relinquished their children.

Ethiopian Ministry of Women Affairs is frequently changing the guiding rules of inter-country adoption to control the increase in adoption rate. It is also requesting both local orphanages and international adoption agencies to participate in sponsorship programs and is encouraging local adoptions. However, since birth mothers are also playing a major

role in the process of inter country adoption it would be helpful to integrate them in programs that can empower them. This study help illuminate the interest and needs of birth mothers hence, help policy makers to be cognizant of these issues as they design guidelines and programs.

This study will also contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the area of birth mothers in Ethiopia and fill the knowledge gap observed as a result of limited researches regarding birth mothers in Ethiopia.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW LITERATURE

This chapter deals with Inter-country adoption (ICA) and relinquishment experience of birth mothers. It begins by describing ICA and different views associated with it. Types of adoption placement and the effects of relinquishing are also discussed. Feelings that are experienced by birth mothers after relinquishment and their coping mechanisms are also presented. Lastly a theoretical framework that guides the research is presented.

Inter-Country Adoption

Inter country adoption has been referred to as a solution in decreasing the number of orphan and vulnerable children. In other words it is an opportunity to have a permanent and suitable family for children that are deprived of their family environment or for those children who cannot in their own best interest remain in them (Saclier, 1998, p.12). Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child indicated that children who have lost their family environment or those children whose living environment is unsafe are entitled to protection and assistance from their government. Hence, ICA is being practiced as a welfare and protection measure (Innocent digest p.3, 1998).

In practicing ICA the notion of the 'best interest of the child' is always put in mind. Meaning that government organizations that are in charge of making the final decision question whether ICA is the best solution for the child given his/her circumstances. In this regard different legal documents such as Convention on the Rights of the child (CRC), the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), The revised Family code and alternative child care guide line of the Ethiopian Ministry of Women Affairs (MOWA) put emphasis on practicing ICA in the best interest of the child in relation to it being practiced as a last resort. The legal documents indicated that ICA would be referred to as

meeting the best interest of the child only when it is practiced in circumstances where other alternative child care options have been exhausted. Such care options are foster care, domestic adoption, institutional care and the like (CRC, Article 21(b), ACRWA 24(b), MOWA, 2009, p.40)

While the existing legal frameworks on ICA emphasizes on ICA being as a subsidiary to all other alternative care options, many argue that how it is practiced is far from this (Triseliotis, 2000 p. 45, Saclier, 1998 p.12). Instead of becoming a welfare measure to protect children, ICA has become a quest for children for those who want to create a family or expand one. Hence, the process has become more of a trade (Triseliotis, 2000, p.45). Saclier (1998, p.12) argues that the concept of ICA as an opportunity for the child and the notion of the best interest of the child have been misinterpreted. Now adoption is practiced with the understanding that “since there are many children suffering in institutions in developing countries and many families keen to adopt in more privileged countries, international adoption should be encouraged and promoted. (Saclier, 1998 p.12)”. Therefore, the argument is that ICA has changed its initial aim of protecting children and providing them a family environment. It is now practiced with a demand driven approach that looks for children corresponding with the criteria set by the adoptive parents

Contrary to the above arguments Biniyam, (2009 p. 98) argued that ICA should be considered as an alternative means of care whenever it is found to be in the best interest of the child irrespective of the last resort requirement. According to Biniyam considering institutionalization particularly a long term institutionalization as an alternative care option should be a last resort measure instead of ICA. However, “states should be prudent not to provide proof to critics who view Inter-country adoption operating in the interest of a family seeking a child, rather than in the best interest of a child seeking a family (Biniyam 2009, p.98).”

Models of Placement and Birth Mothers' Relinquishment Experience

Based on the degree of contact between the biological family and the adoptive family ICA could be divided into three models of placement. The first model of placement, which is usually referred as traditional or confidential, is closed adoption. In the case of closed adoption there is no contact between the biological parent/s and the adoptive parents. Hence, all the adoption planning and placement matters are handled by social workers (Bakker, n.d p.338). The second model is semi-open adoption. In this case biological and adoptive families will not have a direct contact but they will exchange letters and photographs. Here biological parents choose the adoptive parents using a non identifying descriptive profile and they may meet once. But the rest of their contact fully relies on writing.

In the third model which is Open adoption; some degree of sharing information and or direct contact between biological and adoptive parents is there. The contact ranges from one meeting before the child is born to a lifelong friendship (Lamanna & Riedmann, 1999 p.354). The significant difference of this model from the other two is that, the biological parents are the ones who select the adoptive parents and then meet them to share identifying information with one another. Hence, birth parents have a greater knowledge base about the person or the family adopting their child and the degree of openness is high.

Though the above distinctions are clearly put as models of placement in ICA, the different placement and post placement procedures that Ethiopia follow has made it difficult to set a clear-cut in identifying the dominant model. For instance, when the distinction clearly put biological parents choosing power as a way of identifying the three models, in the case of Ethiopia the biological parents does not have a say on who should adopt their children. Instead social workers identify potential adoptive parents meeting the eligible criteria of Ethiopia as stated on the Revised Family Code(Article 184) and the MOWA

alternative child care guideline(MOWA 2009, p.42). This may give ICA a picture of a closed placement model. However, the requirement of sending post placement report (MOWA, 2009 p.46) that contains both written report and pictures to birth families makes the same process of ICA to have criteria that fits semi open adoption. There are also cases where birth and adoptive parents have a continuous close contact and cases where birth parents have no information at all with regard to who adopted their child and where their child is.

How birthmothers experience relinquishment is affected by the model of placement. Though semi-open adoption may serve as a middle ground between closed and open adoption, the argument of relinquishment experience has focused mostly in the cases of open and closed placement. Advocates of open adoption assert that this method of adoption helps in the grieving process of birth mothers after relinquishment. This is because it reassures the birth mother about the wellbeing of her child and allows her to be realistic about the relinquishment (Curtis, 1986 as cited in Blanton, & Deschner, 1990 p. 526). A recent study (Martin et al, 2008, pp 537-538) also suggests that increased openness is significantly associated with birth mothers satisfaction in the adoption process and better post placement adjustments. There was also a positive impression of birth mothers wellbeing.

The discomfort birth mothers feel after relinquishment can also be minimized when they have information about their children. Birth mothers' experience of grief, loss and anger after relinquishment can best be resolved by letting them know that their child is adequately cared and he/she is happy with their decision of relinquishment (Henderson & Sass, 2002, p.30). Hence, the fact that the birth mothers are known and have the information on the adoptive parents decreases their sense of isolation and feelings of powerlessness (Lauderdale & Boyle 1994 cited in Kelly, 2005, p.19). "Having this

information enables the birth parents to imagine or visualize the family environment in which their child will live and may relieve some of the guilt and uncertainty that accompany relinquishing a child (Berry, 1993, p.127)”

In the contrary those who advocate closed or confidential adoption believe that open adoption limits and denies the grieving process that must take place for subsequent life adjustment. Blanton & Deschner, (1990 p.532) indicated that birth mothers who have information about their children after the relinquishment, have a hard time adjusting than mothers whose tie to the child is broken off completely. Their finding further indicated that social isolation, difficulty of normal physical functions, physical symptoms, and feelings of despair and high rate of dependency is more of witnessed on birthmothers who placed their children via open adoption. As a result of the continuous contact a birth mother may have in the case of open adoption, the attachment between the birth mother and the child will still exist. This attachment will create an ambivalence and confusion for the birth mother instead of easing her guilty feeling (Berry, 1993, p.129).

Birth Mothers and Their Decision to Relinquish

Birth mothers' degree of participation in the decision to relinquish their child has a direct relation with how they experience their loss. Birth mothers' decision making power is usually compromised with one or more reasons (Triseliotis, 2000, 47). The use of the term 'decision' may be misleading with regard to relinquishment because of the implication that there was active participation in the decision-making process or that other options were available for consideration (Jones1993 as cited in Kelly, 2005, p.19). “Most relinquishing mothers feel that relinquishment is their only option in the face of financial hardship; pressure from family or professional persons; the stigma associated with single motherhood or illegitimacy; and a general lack of support (Condon, 1986, p.117)”. Birth mothers also feel that, society's construction of relinquishment as a 'voluntary act' and the idea of 'informed

consent' is a charade designed to hide or disguise society's guilt since it is society who forces them to make the decision of relinquishing. (Condon ,1986, p.117).” If birth mothers processed their thoughts well and made the decision to relinquish their child after weighing other options, it is likely that the regret and loss they experience afterwards would be minimal (Jones, 1993 as cited in Kelly, 2005 p.30).

Apart from societal pressure the expected degree of information that they are going to have about their child after placement has also affected birth mothers decision to relinquish. Some birth mothers are more willing to relinquish their child for adoption when they feel that they would be receiving information about their child and maintain some form of contact with adoptive parents after placement (Berry, 1993 p.129).

Feelings of Birth Mothers' after Relinquishment

The extent birth mothers express their feelings of shame, regret or guilt and share the impact of their experience has a great advantage for birth mothers. It helps them to grieve properly. Losses such as death are accompanied by different rituals with in a society. This rituals or ceremonies have the main goal of acknowledging the loss publicly and help mourn those who lost. However, there is a loss which cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially accepted. Such a loss is referred as disenfranchised grief (Robinson, 2001 p. iii). “In many cases of disenfranchised grief, the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not recognized or the griever is not recognized (Robinson, 2001 p. iii)”.

Disenfranchised grief best works with in the case of adoption. This is because birth mothers who have relinquished their children do not get a publicly acknowledged mourn-ing ritual though they may have their own private rituals (Robinson, 2001 p. iii). They are also not accepted and sympathized like any mother who has lost a child for reasons other than adoption (Castle, 2010, p.25).

Birth mothers loss is usually taken so lightly that many times they are told to forget that it ever happened or to move on without properly mourning. As a result birth mothers have high rate of depression and psychosomatic symptoms (Condon 1986, p.118, Logan 1996, p.615). The depression was rooted in feelings of guilt, anger, sadness and grief which are stimulated from time to time by the experience of relinquishment (Logan 1996, p.615). With this regard, birth mothers perceived lack of understanding from the society is resulted because they are told “to forget it, look forward, not back thus denying their real feelings which has yet to be dealt with constructively (Logan 1996, p.617).”

Feelings of regret, shame and other emotional challenges birth mothers deal with is also associated with the way members of the community communicates with the birth mothers. Hardwick, (2000) stated that there are comments which are given to birth mothers frequently but that are painful to the extent of questioning their identity as a mother and their desire to be part of the society. These negative reflections increase the regret and guilt of birth mothers hence disrupts their grieving process (Dunn &Theron, 2006, p. 496).

Relinquishment in its every step is a traumatic experience for the birth mothers. Trauma as most scholars describe it; is an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock and may have long lasting psychological effects.

“Traumas represent destruction of basic organizing principles by which we come to know self, others, and the environment; traumas wound deeply in a way that challenges the meaning of life. Healing from the wounds of such an experience requires a restitution order and meaning in one's life” (Root, 1992 as cited in Kelly, 2005 p.25).

A study done by Rynearson, (1982, as cited in Haugaard,Schustack, & Doorman, 1998, p.92) on 20 mothers who had relinquished a child to adoption indicated that, the actual

signing of the adoption paper is by itself traumatizing. The birth mothers revealed that they have dreams about losing the baby and of traumatic themes of separation and joyful reunions.

The traumatic experience of relinquishing may also result fear on birth mothers. According to Rynearson's study (1982 as cited in Haugaard, Schustack, & Doorman, 1998, p.92) birthmothers had fears of future infertility and reported delays in subsequent dating because of the anger and disillusionment they felt toward men. Birth mothers also experience irrational fear of losing their other child that resulted from their relinquishment experience (Condon, 1986, p.118).

The traumatic experience of relinquishment also appeared to influence the parenting of the birth mothers who eventually got married and have subsequent children. In such cases birth mothers unusual over protectiveness was registered along with a particularly intense attachment to their new born (Condon, 1986, p.118, Rynearson, 1982 as cited in Haugaard, Schustack, & Doorman, 1998, p.92).

Coping with Feelings Associated with Relinquishment

There are two themes while observing the experience of Relinquishment. One is relinquishment as a loss while the other is relinquishment as a stressful life event. Winkler & Vankipple (1984 as cited in Rice, & McNiece, 2006, p.2) indicated that half of the birth mothers in their study have a sense of loss and this sense of loss was related with poor adjustment and presence of psychological impairment. The study also noted social support as a significant factor in adjustment to relinquishment. The amount of social support and perceived freedom of choice in the relinquishment decision helps birth mother in their psychological adjustment and lowers their grief (Rice, & McNiece, 2006, p.2). However, "while grief did decrease over time for mothers ... the level of grief symptoms reported was still quite high, indicating that the passage of time and ongoing contact with the child and/or

adoptive family does not necessarily assist relinquishing mothers to resolve their sense of loss. (Rice, & McNiece, 2006, p.2).”

Relinquishment as a stressful life event on the other hand indicates that stresses associated with relinquishing continues to be activated in the birthmothers' life events. Both positive and negative life events like the birth of a child or the sudden death of a relative is sufficient to activate feelings of mental distress that was first resulted by their relinquishment experience (Logan 1996, p.619). In this case if their first loss was not properly experienced or is denied, it is likely that birth mothers would behave the same way in the case of subsequent losses and suppress their grief. Hence their grieving becomes chronic (Robinson, 2001, p. IV).

Grieving properly after the loss of their child is important for the birth mothers in order to establish equilibrium. It helps them process their loss, accept it and move on with their life. There are four steps of tasks in grieving. “First is to accept the reality of the loss. Second is to experience the pain of grief, third is to adjust to the environment from which the lost person is missed and fourth is to withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in another relationship (Worden n,d as cited in Robinson, 2001, p.vi)”. However, going through all the four steps does not mean the birth mother is going to forget about her child. Rather, it means that she will be able to incorporate the memory of her child and the loss as part of her day to day life while she moves on in to doing other things (Robinson, 2001, p.vi).

Birth mothers deal with the loss of their child in various ways. However, three main patterns were indicated in the study conducted by Neil (2006, pp. 9-10). The first pattern is positive acceptance. Those who were categorized under positive acceptance had positive feelings about the adoptive parents and the life their child is living. They were realistic about their current and future role in their child's life. They also believe that no matter how hard the adoption had been, things had worked out for the better. The second pattern is resignation.

Birth parents under this category were feeling unhappy and their view of adoption was associated with sadness, guilt and anxiety about their child. These parents felt that they have nothing to offer to their child hence, they avoid any possible contact. The third pattern identified by Neil is anger and resistance. These groups of people know that the adoption is irreversible but in their hearts they resist saying that they are still the real parents while referring to the adoptive parents as a legal parents. Due to their resistance they are angry on their family, friends, judges, social workers and also the adoptive parents. They are also usually dismissive of their child's relationship with the adoptive parents.

Birth mothers also use alcohol and other sedative medications as a way of coping after relinquishment (Condon, 1986, p. 118). Condon's study further indicated that almost all participant use withdrawing and 'bottling up' the feeling, as a primary way of dealing with their distress. While one third of the participants sought professional help.

Theoretical Orientation

In the attempt to understand the experience of birth mothers after relinquishment it is important to focus both to the psychological being of the birth mothers as well as their social environment. As it is indicated in the literature review part, birth mothers not only experience relinquishment in relation to their loss but also in relation to how they are perceived in their society and the support they get from the people in their environment. Therefore, the psychosocial model is chosen to guide this study. This model "explores issues of growth and development across the life cycle as a product of the personality interacting with the social environment" (Greene, 2008, P.233) In psychosocial model people's inner or emotional life as well as their external world are focal points; these internal and external factors are important for people's capacity to cope with every day stresses (Trevithick, 2008, p. 272). In other words, psychosocial model involves understanding a person's internal psychological processes as well as how these processes interact with one's current social and physical

conditions (relationships, support system, employment, living situation, and health). This approach stresses the value of the individual and his or her own right to self-determination, that is, the right to make one's own decisions. In general while trying to understand human behavior, the theory gives consideration to both the psychological and social circumstances of the individual in this case the birth mothers.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study had the aim of exploring the experience of birth mothers who relinquished their children. It employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research provides a comprehensive or holistic understanding of the social setting in which research is conducted and helps to understand social problems by focusing on few people affected by a problem (Walliman, 2005, p.247). In addition qualitative research is used when the need to empower individuals to share their experiences and the need for their voice to be heard is there (Creswell, 2005, p.54). Hence, using qualitative design was appropriate in this study. Qualitative design helped in grasping the experience of the birth mothers and understanding the meaning they attach to their experience. It also served as an instrument for the birth mother's voice to be heard. Since I did not find any study that was conducted on birth mothers in Ethiopia, this study was an exploratory one.

Case study research design was chosen to help understand complex social phenomenon and allow the researcher to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life (Yin, 2003, p.2). Case study can also "achieve a rich description of a phenomenon in order to represent it from the participants' perspective (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p.33)." Hence, using case study helped to see each of the birth mothers experience and describe it accordingly.

Study Site

The study site of the research was the city of Addis Ababa. The rationale for selecting Addis Ababa as a study site was; the high concentration of childcare institutions that place children for ICA.

Study Participants

The study participants were birth mothers who had relinquished their children for Inter-country adoption. Participants who satisfied the following criteria were selected to participate in the study. The criteria were: (1) Being able to speak Amharic (national language); (2) Being able to give consent and discuss the issues the study raises; (3) having relinquished before a year or more. A year was presumed enough time for fully internalizing the loss and resumption of normal life. It also allowed enough time for participants to be able to go back and detail the relinquishment process and their decision.

The participant selection procedure that was employed to select the participants for this study was purposive sampling. This sampling technique is suitable to select respondents who are able to analyse their own situation thoroughly and who are more articulate and expressive (Walliman, 2005, p.249). The number of birth mothers who participated in the study was 5. Creswell (2007) suggested that 4 or 5 cases “provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the case as well as conduct across –case theme analysis (p.128). In addition to the birth mothers two key informants were interviewed.

Data Collection Procedure

Different local orphanages and an adoption agency were contacted in the attempt to get participants for this study. The purpose of the study and eligibility criteria of the birth mothers was explained briefly to the responsible staff of the institutions, so that they can help in identifying participants who fit the criteria. Following this, birthmothers who fit the criteria and agreed to participate in the study were contacted.

Upon meeting the participants, pre-interview orientation was held individually because of the sensitive nature of the matter and the need to maintain the birth mothers

anonymity. The pre-interview was also appropriate to make sure that the participants understood the purpose of the study and to address any concerns they might have. After the orientation those who were willing to participate in the study were asked to give their consent verbally.

Throughout the study there was a friendly relationship and that gave the participants the chance to express their emotions and share their experiences freely. All the interviews were done in the informant's place of preference and in the time that was most convenient and comfortable for the participants. Key informants from Addis Ababa Ministry of children, youth and Women affairs and from an adoption agency were also interviewed. The purpose of involving the key informants was mostly to gather general information on birth mothers in Ethiopia and to understand what is being done for the birth mothers.

Data Collection Tool

To gather primary data in-depth interview was conducted both with birth mothers and key informants. An In-depth interview was chosen because "very complex systems, processes or experiences are generally best addressed in in-depth interviews because of the depth of focus and the opportunity for clarification and detailed understanding" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp.36-37). The interviews were non structured and were made to resemble normal conversations, as I gently guided the conversation through stages, and encourage the birth mothers to answer in depth and at length. Here non structured interview was chosen because it would help the participants to tell their stories well (Vanederstoep & Johnston 2009, p.225). Due to the sensitive nature of relinquishing, each birth mother was interviewed twice.

Ethical Consideration

This research focused on the experience of birth mothers who relinquished their children hence, the issue was highly sensitive and personal. For this purpose, explanations were given to participants that they have the right to agree or disagree to participate in the study, and they were informed in detail about the purpose of the research before obtaining their consent. Participants were also aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time in the interview. By this I made certain that participants took part in the study based on their own free will.

The consent form also mentions the sensitive nature of the issue the interview raises including the possible return of memories and feelings they may not find pleasant. Refreshments costs were covered as an expression of gratitude for their valuable contribution. Tape recording was done on the basis of the participants' permission throughout the whole interview process.

I have also taken utmost care to ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of participants. The information gained from interviews was kept confidential and anonymity was insured by not using information that might identify participants and by using fictional names.

Data Analysis Procedure

Qualitative study data analysis starts simultaneously at the first date of data collection (Dey, 1993, p.31). Hence, the analysis of this study was started simultaneously with data gathering. In the initial step audio taped interviews were transcribed into Amharic. In the process of transcription the nonverbal expressions were properly transcribed using the field notes taken while the interview was conducted. After transcription the data was translated

from Amharic to English. Then to facilitate the analysis open code software was used. The translated interviews were fed into the software and coding and thematic development procedures were done. In order to develop code labels, I read each transcribed data repeatedly and assigned codes by the lines and paragraphs. Coding involves labelling or tagging data with labels (Gomm, 2008 p. 298). By coding it will be possible to reduce large amount of data gathered from the in-depth interview to manageable pile (Walliman, 2005 p. 311). Later the codified themes were categorized under separate headings taking the research question and the literature review of the study in to consideration. Then the categorized data was described in a narrative form to convey the results of the analysis. While presenting the findings of the study content analysis was used and the researcher tried to relate items both within and across categories in such a way that they answered the research question.

Limitations of the study

Lack of a base line study in the Ethiopian context was one of the challenges in this study. It was difficult to compare the findings of this research with other similar Ethiopian studies since there is no research found that deals with birth mothers experience. Besides the size of the participants and the procedure through which they were selected might make it difficult to generalize the findings of this study to wider population of birth mothers.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This section contains the findings of the study. The section was organized on the basis of the research questions they answer. It has included data obtained from five birth mothers and two key informants. It begins by describing the background of the participants. It then discusses the participants' reasons for relinquishing, their experience after relinquishment and lastly, coping responses of the participants and their struggle for normality is presented. All the names mentioned in the text are fictional.

Table 1. Participants' demographic background

Name	Age	Marital Status	Religion	Educational Level	Current Occupation
Fikirte	27	Single	Orthodox Christian	never went to school	House maid
Hayat	30	Widow	Muslim	Up to grade 6	Daily laborer
Hewan	30	Widow	Orthodox Christian	Never went to school	Petty trader
Nina	29	Single	Orthodox Christian	12 complete	Sales woman
Selam	28	Single	Muslim	Diploma	Nurse

All of the birth mothers were in the age range of 25 to 30 years. Three of them were never married while two participants, Hayat and Hewan, were widow. Hewan, Fikirte and Selam were Orthodox Christians while the other two (Hayat and Nina) were Muslims. Hewan and Fikirte had never gone to school, Hayat attended school up to grade 6, Nina had completed 12 grades and Selam had a diploma. All had permanent job.

Table 2. Participants' Relinquishment History

Name	Number of children they had	Number of children relinquished	Age of child(ren) at relinquishment	Number of years after relinquishment	Occupation in time of relinquishment
Fikirte	One	One	One year	One	House Maid
Hayat	Six	Five	4,5,8,10,13	One	None
Hewan	Three	Two	6,12	Five	None
Nina	One	One	4days	Three	Student
Selam	One	One	4 months	Three	Student

Three participants, Fikirte, Nina and Selam relinquished their only child while Hayat relinquished five of her six children and Hewan relinquished two of her three children. It has been three years since Selam and Nina relinquished their children for adoption. Hewan relinquished five years ago. Hayat and Fikirte relinquished a year ago. At time of relinquishment the children were within the age range of four days to 13 years. In time of relinquishment two of the participants, Nina and Selam were students. Hayat and Hewan had no job and Fikirte was a house maid. In the case of Nina and Selam they refer to their experience of relinquishment starting from the day they gave their children to orphanages at the age of four days and for months. Because they never had the chance to see them again.

Why do Birth Mothers relinquish their Children?

“Money problem”.

Four of the participants except Nina indicated that the financial hardship that they encountered in one time at their life has “forced” them to relinquish their children. However,

for Hewan the money problem that she had was directly related with the death of her husband as he was the bread winner of the house. Following his death, Hewan moved to Addis Ababa, a city where she had never known before. She started looking for a job with no prior experience. Here is how she described her situation

I just lost my husband, moved to a new city and I was broke. I had no one else to turn to. I did not even know where to look for a job and what to do since I never had the exposure in my life. I was so confused; I just did not know how to raise three kids on my own.

Social pressure.

Nina and Selam stated stigma associated with a child born out of wedlock as the reason for relinquishing. They reported that they were afraid of what people might say to them since giving birth out of wedlock is considered to be “shameful” and “unacceptable” in the society. Nina however reported that she was afraid of both how she would be treated in the society and it would impact the rest of her life. She said:

My mother raised us alone after the death of our father so when I found out that I was pregnant, all I could think of was that I was about to embarrass my mother. My father was a respected and well known man in our society and because of him we, his family, were also given much respect. So giving birth out of wedlock meant ruining my family's reputation. So I had to relinquish to protect the family's name.

For selam the societal pressure was not only in relation to giving birth out of wedlock but more in relation with being a single parent. She stated that by raising a child without a father she would be forced to face “societal rejection”, “judgment” and many other

challenges that she would not want to go through. Besides she stated that a child needs both his/ her parents in order to meet its psychological as well as material needs. She said:

Having a child out of wedlock is something you don't want to do in our society. So when I knew I was pregnant, I was so scared and ashamed. But in the mean time I was sure that I had the father's support. However, when I realize that he didn't want to be a part of it, it went worse. I therefore decided to relinquish.

HIV status.

According to Hayat, her HIV status urged her to think for her children's future. She stated that she was worried about her children because she felt that she might die any time and her children will have no one to look after them. Hence, she decided to relinquish with the belief that her children would have "a home where they would be loved." She said:

My husband was sick for over a year before he died and after his death I got sick and started spending more time in a hospital than in my home. At that time I did not know that my husband died of HIV and I did not even know much about the disease. But a neighbor who was HIV positive initiated me to get tested and I found out that I was HIV positive. Hence, knowing my status made me even weaker and I was in bed.

Each day I was afraid that it is my last and that my children would be forced to live on the streets. Then I heard about inter-country adoption and I decided to start a process for them.

Lack of social support.

All Participants indicated that having no one to encourage them and to help them get through the tough times made them vulnerable and forced them to relinquish their children. However, while all participants indicated that they have faced the ramifications of lack of

familial or social support, the extent and how it is described by the participants differs. For Fikirte, she had no relatives or friends she could lean on and her job was the “only stable” thing she had. So when she knew she was pregnant she was trying her best to hide her pregnancy in order to keep her job. She said:

I was raped and I was still working as a maid when I realize I was pregnant. I had to tie my belly with a scarf, stop eating and wear large size t-shirts so that people wouldn't know that I was pregnant, which would result in losing my job. Besides I had no relative or friend whom I could talk to. So the only way that my daughter is going to have a better life is if I relinquished her.

For Nina the lack of social support was explained in relation to her fear of rejection and discrimination from her family and the society at large. She stated that having no support from her family and her fear of how her family might react if they learned the truth about her “illegitimate child” made her feel that she had “no option but to relinquish.” She said:

I did not realize I was pregnant until the fourth month because I was sick and was taking other medications. When I knew, I was so confused and terrified and I did not know what to do. Given that my family was so strict and true to their religion, I had no option but to consider adoption.

Nina also reported that, given her situation referring to the fact that she and “the father” of her baby were dating for seven years and that her family being so strict, marriage would have been the best solution. However, there was the issue of religion she couldn't overpass. “He is an orthodox and I am a Muslim. You don't think about such things when you are dating but when you face situations like this you start to see clearly and for us marriage was never an option”

Selam stated that she wanted her boyfriend to support her since he was “financially stable”. She said they had been dating for over a year. However, he was “never willing” to support her. According to Selam she tried but could not raise her child on her own. Hence, she decided to relinquish. She described her experience like this:

When I knew I was pregnant, my boyfriend suggested abortion. But for me abortion was no solution ... it is a sinful act. So I had only three options. The first one was to try to work things out with the father. I tried that and it was unsuccessful. My other option was to try to raise my child by myself. Since I was a student, I had no income but I tried as much as I can. The four months that my son stayed with me was kind of a test to see if I can manage but it was impossible. Then I asked myself ... if I could not raise him properly why should he suffer? After all he did not come to this world by his choice. So even though I know that I am going to miss him, I decided to relinquish him.

Hayat's and Hewan's case however was different since they were both married and had more family ties both with theirs and their husbands' relatives. They stated that they choose to relinquish because they feared that if their children are raised by relatives or grandparents they won't take good care of them. It was their fear that relatives “won't educate” their children and “love them enough” like their own children. Hayat further stated that if raised by relatives, her children “will be put to works like herding cattle and doing some other chores usually performed by children at home in rural Ethiopia.” Hewan and Hayat also believed that adoptive parents are more responsible, would provide education and would love their children like one of their own. Both participants also stated that “the legal process of ICA makes adoptive parents accountable”. Hayat stated her fear in such a way

Some relatives have asked me to raise one or two of my kids but I refused. If I give them my children; they will make them shepherds or make them do manual labor without caring to show them love. From seeing how they treat me because of my HIV status, I was sure they won't treat them like their own kids. So why should I give them to relatives or even my mother. This is why I choose adoption despite the pain.

Disinformation.

While the issues above were mentioned as a reason for relinquishment by the participants', Hewan, Selam and Nina indicated that their expectation to maintain contact with their children or the adoptive parents precipitated their decision. Hewan further stated that she was willing to relinquish because she was told that she would be receiving information about her children more often. However, it had been five years and she still never heard about her children. Nina and Selam had to wait three years before they heard about their children

Hewan, selam and Nina had also indicated that they were told they would meet the adoptive parents when they come to take their children. They were also hoping to say good bye to their children. But they never met the adoptive parents and they did not have the chance to say good bye to their children. For selam the adoptive parents were never willing to meet her. She was told that the adoptive parents were "threatened by her presence" and were "afraid that she might want him back". Nina and Hewan on the other hand reported that the "orphanage people were never willing". They were called and were told to come to the orphanage and meet the adoptive parents but by the time they reach there the people working in the orphanage "did not treat them properly." Nina describes her experience in such a way

I received a call from the orphanage and they told me that my children were about to leave the country. But when I reach there no one was willing to talk to me. I asked

why I was not meeting my children and they said my children were with the adoptive parents in their hotel and they told me to wait. I waited the whole day and no one came. I was afraid if I left the orphanage that I would not get to see my children so I spent the night there sleeping on the porch. But the next day a staff from the orphanage told me that my children had already gone. I was too shocked to believe it but the woman said that she tried my phone a lot of times and my phone did not work.

Feelings of Birth Mothers after Relinquishment

All the participants indicated that relinquishing their children was the “most difficult experience” of all. They stated that they were so vulnerable as a mother since it may be “the last day that they will ever see their child”. They stated that they were crying a lot and were telling their children all sort of things to let them know that they loved them and that they relinquished them because they wanted them to have a “better life”. The participants also told their children to be strong and to be successful in life. This is how Nina explained her last day with her child:

On my last night with him, I could not sleep. I was holding him and staring at him all night long. I was told to be ready for 6 in the morning so I sat holding him and talking to him all night. I was telling him not to be scared and that he would grow up being a good man. Even though he was only four days old, he was looking straight into my eyes and it felt like he was searching for my soul.

Realizing the loss.

Participants stated that their first emotional experience after relinquishment was realizing that they have lost their children. According to the participants they were “consumed” with the thought of choosing what was best for their children and for

themselves. They were weighing options, calculating risks and trying to make the right decision. Hence, they realize the loss after their children were gone. Nina said

After I gave my child to the orphanage I went home. There the first thing I did was to take a shower, then it hit me, I just lost my baby and there I was being comfortable. I cried for a long time every day.

Anger.

Most participants stated that after they relinquished their children, it was challenging for them to be back to the environment in which their children were lost from. They said that they “could not be themselves” and “nothing seemed normal”. They were also crying a lot and were angry almost every day. They were angry at themselves and were “irritable” by what is going on around them. They were not interested in doing things that they used to and “Nothing seemed to be to their liking.”

Regrets.

Three of the participants, Nina , Hewan and Selam experienced regret.

Nina stated that she regretted her decision because she could have made other arrangements for her child other than adoption. She indicated that she felt “selfish” and “inconsiderate” of her and her child’s future. She felt that she was too much concerned with the presented problems that she never took the time to look further and understand what relinquishment would mean both for her and for her child. She said:

I regret having a baby like this; I regret that he has gone. Both me and the father are educated and well informed on a lot of things, but what happened to us at the time I don’t know. It is just being careless. At the time, we could not win ourselves and look at the bigger picture. We were being selfish. I decided like that because I want to be

comfortable and did not want my family to know. Everything was so unclear for me then because I was wrapped up with the thought of protecting my family's honor.

Selam and Hewan regretted their decision in relation to what their expectation was and what the reality is. They stated that they were told by the delala (broker) that they will have frequent contact with their children or with the adoptive parents. However, when they didn't receive information as they were promised and when they realize that most of their expectations were "far from the truth" they regretted their decision. Hewan Said:

If I knew that there would be no contact, that I would end up wondering about my children every day, that the pain does not go away,... if only I knew then what I know now I wouldn't have relinquished my children.

Another misinformation indicated by the Key informants from an adoption agency and MOWA is birth mothers expectation to get financial support from the adoptive parents. The key informants stated that birth mothers are often given wrong information by delalas (brokers) that they make decisions before they fully understand what relinquishment meant. They may not also be fully aware that putting their children in orphanage meant giving the mandate of deciding on their children to the orphanage. Rather, the birth mothers usually feel that they are entering in to a contract with the adoptive parents while maintaining their parental right.

They are told that they are going to benefit financially when their children are adopted. They are told that they are going to have a contact. But in reality other than the post placement or follow up report there might be no contact and there is no financial benefit. That is why when birth mothers stand in federal court and understand the finality of their decision they become too shocked to say 'no' and hold

their consent. They burst in tears the moment they are out of the court house. It is from this moment onwards that the birth mothers start to live with their regrets.

Hewan stated that the improvements in her living condition in general and specifically the increase in income has made her regret the decision. She further stated that the more her business is successful and the more she earned, the more she felt guilty and regrets her decision. She also stated that being happy about her life has made her feel a "failure" as a mother. Hence, she "isolates herself" from her neighbors and from activities that brings joy to her life. She said:

Whenever I am happy I think about my children. I wish they were with me. I gave them up when I was confused and in a bad condition but that do not ease the pain. I am constantly reminded that I gave them up for I was unable to feed them. I do not even want to see the neighbors' kid in my house. Because whenever I feel like I helped another child I say to myself ... I should not have given up my kids. I feel that somehow I could have provided my children's need just like I am doing now for someone else's child.

Hayat and Fikirte on the other hand indicated that they do not regret their decision. They stated that they have met the adoptive parents of their children. They also stated that they have maintained contact with the adoptive parents. While Fikirte's contact is mediated by the adoption agency that facilitated her child's case, Hayat contacts both her children and the adoptive parents via telephone and Email. According to both participants the information they have about their children's wellbeing and the changes in their children's life was an indication that they made the "right choice". Fikirte added that having information about the people who adopted her child and the environment in which her child is living in was also a source of satisfaction. Fikirte Said:

When I look back at how my daughter used to look and how she is doing now I am happy. I received photographs of my daughter three months after she was gone. She has changed a lot so. I have also met the adoptive mother and received her pictures; she seems a good person so I am glad. The meeting and the pictures assured me that my daughter is well taken care of. She has grown up and is living a life that I am sure she wouldn't be having if she was with me.

Blame.

Nina and Hewan blame themselves for their loss. They refer to themselves as “selfish” and “inconsiderate” of the effects of relinquishment. They also blame themselves for not being a mother enough to endure the challenge they once faced. Nina added that she not only blame herself but question her identity as a mother. She said:

I ask myself if I am a mother too many times. Did I give birth? Where is my child? How could I call myself a mother when I don't have my child with me? Would I have the right to call myself his mother when I did not raise him?

All participants except Fikirte blamed people around them who were directly or indirectly involved in their decision to relinquish. However, Nina and Selam blamed the father of their children for their loss. Participants stated that they blame these people for not caring enough or for not understanding their pain. They felt that if they had more support or if things were different they wouldn't relinquish their children. Nina Said:

I was back to my routine life fifteen days after I gave birth. If I was going to regain my strength this fast I should have waited a little longer before making the decision. That is my regret. I blame it all on the father of my child; for my pregnancy and for

losing my baby. We should not have sex while we were students and I was afraid that this might happen. I resent him for that.

Grief.

All Participants stated that they grieve for their lost children every day. They also stated that though they grieve everyday "some days are more painful than others". On such days they choose to be left alone, they confronted their God and questioned their purpose in life. They also spent such days at home crying. Hayat and Hewan shared their experience in such a way:

Some days especially when I miss my children too much, I feel so much pain. I feel so awful that I forget myself and the purpose of living. I hate that I am a human being. I question my existence and I start arguing with God. (Hayat)

It usually happens once in two weeks where I completely lose the meaning of living. On these days I do not go to work. I want to be left alone and I do not even want to see my son. I stay in bed the whole day while holding my children's picture and I cry until there is no more tear. (Hewan)

Fear.

Nina and Hewan indicated that their experience after relinquishment is also characterized by fear. They stated that their days were spent worrying and their nights are accompanied by nightmares. They feared for their children whom they have relinquished. They imagined about everything that may go wrong in their children's life. They also wondered if their children understood why they had relinquished them. They wonder if their children would accept them as their mothers when and if they meet in the future. Hewan said:

I have too many sleepless nights and when I sleep I always have a nightmare. I dream about my children. Once I dreamt of a black woman taking my children into the forest and I followed her. Then I saw my children sitting in the field. It was a remote area and my children were in misery. At that precise moment some students speaking a strange language came out of a school. I thought my children were with them and I said to myself didn't they tell me my children are going to go abroad and will have a good life and I asked myself why they are there. I started thinking how I was going to take them away from all that and I woke up feeling helpless.

Hewan also stated that she had intrusive thoughts about her child who is now living with her. She feels that she is "over protective" of him. It is her fear that she would lose him too and "end up alone". Hayat also shares her experience. Hayat said:

Whenever I leave my house I worry and I don't trust myself until I am back home and I see him. I kept thinking what if something happened to him. If someone from my neighbors called me while I am out, I get scared thinking something terrible must have happened to my child. I could not take it when he gets a fever or common cold. I feel like I am going to lose him. When I leave him to stay with friends, I do not feel good until I see him because I fear that he would be hurt.

Factors that Evoke Birth Mothers' Relinquishment Experience

While the above feelings (anger, regret, blaming, and fear) were experienced by the participants as a result of their relinquishment decision, they had indicated there were circumstances that evoked or worsen their experience. Such circumstances are mentioned below.

Events.

For the participants in this study holidays, birthdays and any other days that are celebrated in each family was referred as the most disturbing days. On such days they either wish for their children to be part of the celebration or blame those who are celebrating it for doing it in the absence of their children. The participants also stated that they wonder how their children would spend that day. Most of the participants stated that on such days they feel lonely and they want to be left alone. Hewan shared her feelings in such a way:

Holidays are always hard for me since they are happy moments. I get easily frustrated and fight with my kid and the neighbors. So I always want to be alone in my house. I try to make myself busy with chores around the house but it never works. Sometimes it gets to the point where I couldn't take it any longer and I feel like covering my ears and screaming out load. I cry a lot.

Nina added other triggering moments like visiting a mother who gave birth, watching a mother with her son in public, watching young couples walk hand in hand and watching a mother begging for alms with her children. According to Nina such moments force her to have a flash back of what her life was like or how it should have looked. With regard to visiting a mother who gave birth Nina said the following:

I have stopped visiting a mother who gave birth since I relinquished my child. It is our culture to visit the mother having a gift usually a cloth but I could not make myself do such things as i used to do. All I can think of is why I should be clothing someone else's child when in fact no one gave my son a cloth. I know that the reason they did not give him is because they do not know that he is born or existed. But that did not kept me from blaming them and from thinking they should have.

Lack of contact.

Hewan indicated that having no contact with her children or the adoptive parents has made her loss “unbearable”. She said she is unable to focus on things as she is always distracted with the thought of her children. She further stated that all the negative news that she heard about adoption in different media affected her. Hence, she is in so much pain and sometimes she loses her “will to live”. Hewan Said:

I think of my children every day. Every day I go to government offices, orphanages and I talk to people whom I think may have information about my children. My life has been pretty much like this since I lost my children. The orphanage where I put my children in has never given me enough information as to where exactly they are and how they are doing. I never received a follow up report. So when I could not find my children, when I fail to hear their voices, I start to wonder why I am still alive. Why am I comfortable here when they are lost? I feel that I failed as a mother for giving my children away.

Discrimination.

All participants stated that they have been subject to discrimination and judgment by the society. They reported that they had had too many challenges. They were accused of selling their children and not loving them enough. When they dressed well it is interpreted as they forgot about their children. They were afraid to give parenting advises because they are perceived as “a failed parent” in the society. Hewan stated her experience in such a way:

Some people think that you gave up your children because you do not love them. Just because they have good income and they can raise their kids, they judge you. They do not think that we do it because we want the best for our children. After my children

left, people started talking. It became so hard for me to have a social life. If I dressed up well they will whisper. It is like they expect you to stay poor and pitiful. What they say really hurts my feelings. Some of them even think that I forgot all about my kids and that I do not ask about them. They think I do not worry, I do not feel pain or i don't miss my children. If only they knew how I feel.

Coping Mechanisms

Acceptance.

Hayat and fikirte has stated that they feel the adoption process has worked better for their children and are satisfied with their decision of relinquishment. They indicated that though they miss their children, the fact that their children have a "better life" than what they could offer and knowing that they are loved helped them accept things as they are. Fikirte Said:

Every day I think about my daughter. When I finish my daily work I sit for a long time and look at her album or the framed picture of her in my room. I feel mixed feelings of happiness and sadness. I feel sad when I am reminded that she won't live with me and that we may never be together. It is so challenging. I feel that if she was with me she could have helped me forget my problems because she is the one good thing in my life. But I also feel happy when I think that she is going to have a better life than I can give her.

"Taking".

All participants reported that talking about their feelings and getting a support from friends makes a lot of difference in their experience of relinquishment. They stated that when they share their experience they feel like a weight is lifted off their shoulder and that they can

“breathe again”. Nina added that not only talking about her experience but also writing a letter to her son relieves the pain of relinquishment. She said:

I feel at ease when I am talking about my feelings. I feel like I am talking to my son and that there is someone who wants to listen to what I had to say. I sometimes even write a letter addressed to him though I don't mail it. It is like a way of realizing my frustration.

Helping others.

Helping other birth mothers who have relinquished was also another coping mechanism used among the participants. They reported that whenever they help a birth mother get information about her child or help any mother who is struggling, they feel that they are healing. All participants indicated that this feeling of being healed comes from their strong desire to show others that they care and that they understand what they are going through. Nina said:

Whenever I met someone in my condition I would do anything in my power to help them. I feel that together we can ease each other's pain. When I see mothers in trouble or youngsters on the street I would go to them and talk to them to show them that somebody cares. Because I feel that if I had someone who cared enough I would not be in this position. Everything that I feel I have missed or should have been done for me, I do it for others.

Similarly Hewan said the following while explaining how helping other birth mothers help her deal with the pain of relinquishing.

I always help birth mothers when they need help. I advise them on where and how to go on things when they are desperate to hear from their children. I do this because I

have been there and still am and I know how painful it is. I also advise mothers who are considering adoption not to do it. I share my experience with them. It just feels right to save one mother the anguish and pain of relinquishing.

Concealing feelings.

All participants reported that they prefer not to talk about their feelings whenever they feel that they are judged or when they feel that people would not understand them. According to the participants they rather talk with someone who has the same experience and who can relate to their story. Hence, they prefer putting all their feelings inside. Hewan said the following when she talked about her experience:

I don't talk about my kids with people. Because when you do what they say hurts more. Even if I started telling them I won't talk about it freely because they won't understand me. They tell me that my children will come back someday and that the pain gets easier. But they can't possibly know how I am feeling inside. What they say does not help at all. All I want to do is to go to a quiet place and think.

Withdrawing.

Participants stated that there are circumstances where they think that they were not given enough attention, social support and were discriminated which made them isolate themselves. Moreover, the participants stated that the response from the community regarding their decision and how they should live their life afterwards makes them question their desire to be part of the society.

Spirituality.

All of the participants stated that their faith has a major contribution in helping them accept what has happened in their life. It helped them deal with the pain of relinquishment in

their own way. It gave them hope, a hope that things would be better and that one day they will be reunited with their children. Hewan said:

I always go to church. Being there gives me the freedom to think or sort out my thoughts. Being there also gives me the chance to talk to God. Every time I am there, I feel like God is whispering something to me about my children. I always leave the church with a strong feeling of being reunited with my children. I leave with a hope.

In addition to going to church, Nina stated how praying and fasting helps her cope with the loss in such a way: "I always remember my son in my prayers. When I am fasting and praying I feel that I am connected to my son and that I am going to see him soon."

Struggling to Keep Going

Participants stated that the anguish, the regret and guilt, the intrusive thoughts about their adopted children and other related feelings continued even if years have gone by and some of them have maintained contact with the adoptive parents. However, Hewan and Hayat feel that despite their pain, they are struggling to "keep going". They stated they had learned to incorporate their pain into their day to day life, as they want "to live" for their children who are now living with them. Hewan said:

At first you get easily upset and the simplest things get on your nerves. But you learn to deal with it somehow by yourself ... I wish I had the power to change things but I don't. Through time I learned to be patient ... I am not healed but I have learned to live with the pain, I have to live for my children.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Reason for Relinquishing

Birth mothers state many factors as reasons for relinquishing their children. However, poverty is one of the major reasons in many adoption cases (Marsumura &Roby,2002 p.17). Health related reasons especially HIV/AIDS, fear of stigma associated with a child born out of wedlock, single parenting, a child born from incest or rape were also reasons mentioned by many researchers (e.g. Matsumura &Roby, 2002 p. 17,Condon, 1986, Resnick, 1984 P.6). Consistent with the previous studies, this study also revealed that financial hardship is still the major reason for birth mothers decision to relinquish their children. Reasons like HIV/AIDS, single parenting and child born out of wedlock were also indicated in the finding. In relation to having a child out of wedlock, the finding of this study indicated that birth mothers decision to relinquish their children is not only because they fear that they are going to be discriminated and stigmatized but also because they feel that they have to preserve their family's honor.

This study's finding indicated that stating one reason solely for the participants' reason of relinquishment would not be right. Almost in all cases of the participants, there are two or more reasons that facilitated their decision. However, the participants preferred to stress on one of the reasons. Reasons like financial hardship, lack of social support, stigma in relation to a child born out of wedlock and disinformation were among the reasons that seem to intertwine in a single case.

Condon (1986, p.117) indicated that birth mothers decide to relinquish their children with the impression that there is no other option available. Their study further stated that reasons like financial hardship, pressure from the family, general lack of support, single motherhood and fear of stigma makes birth mothers feel that they have no choice but to relinquish their children. In most cases the birth mothers are also misled or are not fully

informed about relinquishment (Berry, 1993, p. 129). Hence, using the term 'decision' might be misleading as it refers to having options and actively participating in the matter (Triseliotis, 2000, p.47). In line with this, the findings of this study revealed that participants have relinquished their children basically for a temporal financial problem, due to the lack of support, or for having no or wrong information (misled or not informed). These reasons have led the participants to believe that relinquishment is their only option. Hence, they 'decided' to relinquish their children without knowing the facts, implications or future consequences of relinquishing.

In cases where birth mothers processed their thoughts well and made the decision to relinquish their children after weighing other options, it is likely that the regret and loss they experience afterwards would be minimal (Jones, 1993 as cited in Kelly, 2005, p.30).

Similarly this finding indicated that participants who were fully aware of the overall situation and who actively participated in the decision making have adjusted better.

Birth Mothers Experience after Relinquishment

While there is a variance how relinquishment is experienced among birth mothers, feelings of guilt, anger, sadness, grief, self-condemnation and low self esteem were mentioned in previous studies (Kelly,2005, Logan,1996, p. 615). According to the findings of the present study, the birth mothers are experiencing regret, anger, fear, grief and intrusive thoughts. Even those birth mothers who are involved in an ongoing contact with their children experience loss and pain of the relinquishment. However, what was found to be new in this study is that birth mothers' feelings of regret, guilt and shame increased when they are happy and their life situation improved. This is so because when birth mothers start to have a stable financial income and are in a position to resist society's pressure, they start to feel that their decision was not selfless. They blame themselves for not being strong enough to endure the challenges they once faced.

Some birth mothers are more willing to relinquish their child for adoption when they feel that they would be receiving information about their child and maintain some form of contact with the adoptive parents after placement (Berry, 1993 p.129). The same was found to be true in the finding of this study. Participants who had expected to maintain contact with their children, gave them up with the understanding that relinquishing them was better than the alternative, their children “suffering with them”. But when they realized that they were misinformed and that their expectations and the reality did not coincide, participants regretted their decision.

Birth mothers experience after relinquishment is also characterized by acute sorrow and emptiness along with a sense of panic that the feeling will not go away (Donaldson, 2007, p.54)”. Donaldson further stated that “Sometimes this leads to searching behavior, such as scanning crowds in the hope of spotting their children, being preoccupied with fantasies about them, or experiencing nightmares and extreme fears about their well-being. In line with this, the participants in this study experienced frequent nightmares and extreme fears for their children. They always worry about their children’s wellbeing and question themselves if their decision was right. Previous findings have also indicated that the traumatic experience of relinquishment appeared to influence the parenting of the birth mothers who eventually got married and had subsequent children. In such cases birth mothers unusual over protectiveness was registered along with a particularly intense attachment to their new born (Condon, 1986, p.118, Rynearson, 1982 as cited in Haugaard, Schustack, & Doorman, 1998, p.92). In the case of this study though, there were no participants who were married and had subsequent children after they relinquished, the same behavior of intense attachment and over protectiveness was witnessed with their children who are presently living with them.

Contact between a birth mother and her relinquished child is believed to be a solution to a painful decision (Castle, 2010, p.243). During contact, birth mothers gain the knowledge

about their children's wellbeing and they become more realistic about the relinquishment (Curtis, 1986 as cited in Blanton, & Deschner, 1990 p. 526). The fact that they are known and have the information on the adoptive parents decreases the birth mothers sense of isolation and feelings of powerlessness (Lauderdale & Boyle 1994 cited in Kelly, 2005, p.19). The information would also enable birth mothers to have a clear picture about the family environment in which the child lives in and may relieve guilt and uncertainty that results from relinquishing (Dunn & Theron, 2006 p.496). In line with this, the finding of this study shows that participants who have contact with their children or their adoptive parents, either directly or indirectly are adjusting better than those who do not have any contact. The finding also revealed that those who have a direct contact via telephone or email have adjusted even better than those who are mediated through an agency.

For birth mothers expressing their feelings of shame, regret or guilt and sharing the impact of their experience with another person is helpful in the grieving process and in facilitating their adjustment (Logan 1996, p.617). When birthmothers does not receive help from people who truly understand their experience, they can feel totally alone and unable to cope with overwhelming feelings (Tubbs and Boss (2000), as cited in Donaldson, 2007 p. 53). The same is true for how they are treated in the community. As the present finding revealed when birthmothers face rejection from the society or are judged for the choices they made, they start questioning their desire to be part of the society. Such response from the society also disrupts their grieving process and affects their adjustment (Dunn & Theron, 2006, p.496)

Even in cases where there is social support it may not necessarily allow ventilation of feelings (Donaldson, 2007). People may be afraid to open up old wounds of the birth mothers and choose not to mention the subject. This was the case for one participant in this study. In other aspect birth mothers perceived lack of understanding from the society is resulted

because they are told “to forget it, look forward, not back thus denying their real feelings which has yet to be dealt with constructively (Logan 1996, p.617).” Birth mothers in this study were advised to put matters behind them and go on with their lives. They were told that their children are in safe hands and they should not be worried. As the finding indicated, advises like these gave the birth mothers the message that they don't have the right to grieve the loss of their child, that the person they are talking to does not understand how they feel. So through time they choose not to talk about their feelings or concerns.

Coping Mechanism

Relinquishment is an ongoing process. It is not static but exists temporally and developmentally, so the risks continue. (Castle, 2010, p. 253). The process or the experience of relinquishment can be seen from two themes, relinquishment as a loss and relinquishment as a stressful life event (Winkler & Vankipple 1984 as cited in Rice, & McNiece, 2006, p.2). In both cases birth mothers choose their own coping mechanism. Coping mechanisms like, accepting the reality, talking about it, withdrawing, bottling up, alcohol and other seductive medications and seeking help were mentioned in many literatures (eg Neil's, 2006, pp. 9-10, Condon, 1986, p.118). Consistent with the above findings, this study also revealed that participants use mechanisms such as withdrawing, bottling up, and acceptance, talking about it and others except alcohol and seductive medications. The finding also indicated that the mechanisms that the birth mothers use highly depends on the environment they are in. In circumstances where they feel they are judged or are not understood or have no social support they prefer to withdraw or conceal their feelings. While in cases where they feel they are accepted and have a support, they prefer to talk or express their feelings. The new finding in this study was birth mothers idea of 'helping others' or helping vulnerable children, mothers and birth mothers in order to facilitate their healing process.

For birth mothers positive and negative life events like the birth of a child or the sudden death of a relative is sufficient to activate feelings of mental distress that was first resulted by their relinquishment experience (Logan 1996, p.619). In this case if their first loss was not properly experienced or was denied, it is likely that birth mothers would behave the same way in the case of subsequent losses and suppress their grief. Hence, their grieving becomes chronic (Robinson, 2001, p. IV). Similar participants in this study expressed emotional challenges such as grief, anger and emptiness when they think of going to events such as a birth of a child. They stated that they behaved the same way and expressed their feelings by denying the whole thing and by choosing not to go. The finding also revealed that it is not only events such as the birth of a child that activated feelings of relinquishment for the birth mothers but also special events such as holidays and birthdays.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Conclusion

This study is believed to have contributions in advancing the existing little knowledge in Ethiopia regarding birth mothers. The study looks at the experience of five birth mothers in Addis Ababa. In this study, attempts were made to understand the available options presented for birth mothers while they decided to relinquish and the participants understanding of relinquishment. The psychological and social challenges faced by the birth mothers and their coping mechanisms were also identified and described.

For most birthmothers who participated in this study, Inter-Country Adoption appeared to be a viable option for their child's future, given poverty and the lack of resources. There were also cases of an illegitimate child and HIV AIDS. The finding indicated that it was not only a single factor that forces the birth mothers to relinquish. Reasons like financial hardship, lack of social support, stigma in relation to illegitimacy and perceived degree of contact were among the reasons that seem to intertwine in a single case. As to the decision to relinquish, the finding revealed that most of the birth mothers relinquished their children without fully knowing the facts, implications and future consequences of relinquishing. There were also some questionable means used to influence the birthmothers' decision to relinquish their children. They were informed that they would have contact or the chance to say goodbye to their children which most of them did not. This clearly shows how birth mothers decision making power was compromised.

Placing a child for adoption places a significant amount of stress in a birth mother's life. However, as the interviews remarked, birth mothers are too often invisible and their loss is not recognized by many. Very little is known about who they are or what they need. According to the findings of this study the grief and the experiences of the loss can be unbearable and difficult to process for the birth mothers. Most of the birth mothers indicated

that they regret their decision. They are usually angry and have an intrusive thought about their adopted children. They also experience judgment and stigma around their decision to place their children for adoption. The finding also showed that the negative perception by their neighbors' and the community at large influenced the feelings and interaction of the birth mothers with others both within and outside their community.

Birth mothers used different mechanisms striving to cope with the anguish and grief of relinquishing their children. For those who have a supportive and positive environment in which they can express their feelings, talking about their experience was the best method. Others have preferred to withdraw or to conceal their feelings. Some others have also used helping birth mothers in similar situations as their coping strategy.

In general, birth mothers who felt they had an active participation in the decision making and had contact and social support have adjusted better. However, based on the finding it is reasonable to conclude that though relinquishing a child by itself represents a loss and a stressful life event, the birth mothers are invisible and there is no psychosocial support given to them. This has affected their adjustment and further their experience of isolation and grief.

Implications of the Study

Implication for social work practice.

Inter-country Adoption has been a topic of discussion in many instances. Much has been said about the relinquished children and the system as a whole in Ethiopia but the need of the birth mothers are not yet recognized. This research noted that most birth mothers are not aware of the facts, implications or consequences of relinquishing until they experience it. The communities in which birth mothers live in do not know or understand what they are feeling or experiencing. Hence, three areas in which social work practice could be of help were identified.

Counseling.

The service of counseling can help in the preventive arena and also in helping birth mothers adjust to the painful experience of relinquishing. As the finding of this study indicated many mothers decide to relinquish without fully knowing the facts related with relinquishing. They usually have expectations that are far from the reality or to what is stated in the law. Therefore, when the birth mothers first go to the lower government offices deciding to put their child in an institution there must be some service of counseling available to help them make an informed decision. Someone must be responsible enough to check if the birth mothers have the right information, if they know what relinquishment means, whether they understand that putting their children in an orphanage means they are giving the mandate for the orphanage, if they have considered other options or whether or not other options are available for them. As many legal documents indicated Inter-country adoption should be a last resort decision when all other options are not believed to be in the best interest of the child. So a birth mother who is looking for what is best for her child should not be forced to relinquish because that was the only thing she felt she can do. In such cases social workers could play a big role in helping birth mothers decide what is best for their child and for themselves as mothers.

Counseling service should also be provided to help birth mothers deal with what they experience after relinquishing. It will be very important for helping them accept their situation, cope with the challenges and problems they face and to enhance their self-esteem and Reinforce their positive attitude towards life. It also helps birth mothers to grieve properly and adjust to the environment from which their children are lost. It would also empower them to communicate and share openly what they feel. Besides, since birth mothers cannot forget about their children, counseling would help them incorporate the memory of

their children and the loss as part of their day to day life while they move on into doing other things or invest in other relationships.

Advocacy.

The other social work intervention in which birth mothers can benefit from is through advocacy. Advocating for the better awareness of the community about birth mothers will help in minimizing the stigma and discrimination associated with relinquishing. Because, a positive response for birth mothers from the community can have an impact in minimizing the challenges they face while trying to play their role in the society. It will also encourage them to express their feelings and opinions. Through creating advocacy the community could also engage in activities that go beyond helping birth mothers adjustment. The community can work hand in hand to help support vulnerable mothers who may be considering relinquishment.

The advocacy work should also include cases of post placement or follow up reports. As the finding of the study indicated most of the birth mothers had concerns regarding the issue of contact after relinquishment. Hence, orphanages who are handling the adoption cases should be given the awareness as to how much significant it is for the birth mothers to have contact with the adoptive parents or their children. They should also be liable in providing post placement or follow up reports to the birth mothers.

Networking.

Social workers can also help birth mothers by working as a broker. They can search and connect them with the necessary service provision areas and service providers. Creating a psychosocial support group for birth mothers is also very important at this level since there are no support groups or organizations that help birth mothers.

Implication for further research

The finding of this study has answered only few questions regarding relinquishment and birth mothers experience. However, the issue of relinquishment cannot be totally addressed with only one research. This research has shown a deeper understanding of relinquishment and birth mothers' experience. Hence, it helps to employ appropriate interventions by taking into consideration the experience, feelings and coping mechanisms of the birth mothers. Moreover, the findings of this study can also serve as a base for further researches in the area. For instance, studying the relinquishment process in the orphanages with regard to the birth mothers role and the information they have, would provide broader view on the relinquishment process and later in how relinquishment is experienced. Studies could also be conducted on the experience of birth mothers who get married and have subsequent children after they have relinquished and also on the experience of birth fathers who relinquished.

Implication for social policy

In our country, Ethiopia, there are legal documents that address the issue of Inter-Country Adoption. These legal documents mention Inter-Country Adoption as a last resort to help orphaned and vulnerable children. However, the question is whether Inter-Country Adoption is practiced as a first or last resort in situations where there are no other options available. Following the rapid increase in the number of children adopted from the country the guiding rules on Inter-Country Adoption has changed many times. The government has introduced sponsorship programs, encouraged domestic adoptions and used other methods in order to mitigate the problem. However, the programs that are introduced to fill the gap in the practical implementation of these legal documents and to reinforce the last resort notion did not include birth mothers. Therefore, birth mothers should be integrated in policies and programs that target Inter-Country Adoption.

The findings of this study and also many other studies have indicated that birth mothers relinquish their children mainly because of financial hardship. Hence, policies should ensure economic empowerment of mothers so that mothers and their children can never be separated for what is basically a temporary financial problem.

In general, the adoption community or any other stake holders can contribute in changing the present perception of birth mothers and relinquishing. They should expand the body of knowledge about birth mothers. There should be service and programs that provide birth mothers with the resources, skills and the support they need. It is the change in attitude of orphanages, adoption agencies, government office workers, the society and the birth mothers themselves that would help birth mothers in their strive to be healed and live a better life.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent for Participants

My name is Kalkidan Alelign, and I am a post graduate student at Addis Ababa University School of Social Work. I am conducting a qualitative study on the experience of birth mothers who relinquished their children for adoption. I am conducting this study for partial fulfillment of my Master's degree in Social Work. The purpose of this study is to understand the feelings and challenges faced by birth mothers after relinquishing. The findings of the study can serve as an instrument to create awareness about birth mothers' and their needs.

If you agree to participate in the study, your participation will involve an in-depth interview of one to two hours (estimated) time which will be audio taped or (note will be taken) for later analysis. I am aware of the fact that this is a sensitive issue and may be difficult to talk about, so please know that if you would like to stop at any time, you can. The information you disclose to me is strictly confidential. It will not be passed to any third party nor shall it be used for purposes other than this research. Your name shall not appear in any documentation upon which this interview is based.

By signing below you will be indicating that you have read and understood the above information, and you are interested in participating in this study.

Signature _____

Name _____

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Birth Mothers

Participants' background:

- I. Tell me your biographical information including age, marital status, religion, education and occupation.
- II. Tell me about your relinquishment history, how many children have you relinquished, how many years has it been since you relinquished, how old were your children at the time of relinquishment and what was your occupation at the time of relinquishment

Research Question 1: Why do birth mothers decide to relinquish their children for adoption?

1. What were your reasons for relinquishing?
2. Have you considered other options before relinquishing? If so, what were the options that you have considered?
3. Do you feel that you have made the decision? Were you pressured or made to decide?
4. Are there issues that have influenced your decision other than the reason you mentioned?
5. Did you meet the adoptive parents when they came to take the child? If yes, what was the experience like?

Research Question 2: What do birth mothers feel after relinquishing their children for adoption?

1. How do you feel when you think of your decision? Do you feel that you have made the right decision?
2. What were your feelings after relinquishment?
3. Do you think the relinquishment has an impact on your current life? If so, what kind of impact?
4. Do you have contact with your child or the adoptive parents? If so what kind of contact?
5. Do you have a support system?
6. How is your decision perceived in your living area?

Research Question 3: How do birth mothers cope with the after effects of relinquishment?

1. Do you think your decision influenced the way you live and communicate with people? If so, How?
2. How often do you think about your adopted child?
3. What do you do when you think about your child?
4. From your experience what things help you deal with the loss of your child?
5. What meaning does life has for you? What do you feel when you think about the future?

Appendix C

Interview Guide for Key Informants

1. Why do birth mothers relinquish their children?
2. How do birth mothers decide to relinquish their children (the legal process involved)?
3. To what degree do you think birth mothers participate in the decision making process?
4. Are there any issues that you feel influences birth mothers decision?
5. What are birth mothers feelings after making the decision (After they testify in court)?
6. Are there services or a support that is provided to the birth mothers?
7. Do birth mothers have access to post placement or follow up reports?
8. What kind of information do you provide to the birth mothers both before and after relinquishment?
9. From your experience in working with birth mothers what kind of services do you suggest they should get?

Appendix D

Amharic translation of the Informed consent

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Appendix E

Amharic translation of the Interview Guide for Birth mothers

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Appendix F

Amharic Translation of the Interview guide for key informants

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Declaration

I, kalkidan Alelign, hereby confirm that this thesis in the title “Birth Mothers’ Experience after Relinquishment” is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university, and all sources of material used for the thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Signature: _____

Date: _____