

Adoption Counseling Services Experienced by Unwed Mothers in Korea

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*Background to the Presentation on Experiences of Unwed Mothers*¹

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be here with you. I am Hyoung-Suk Choi, the Public Relations Manager of the Korean Unwed Mothers & Families Association (KUMFA). I am an unwed mother of a six-year-old boy. When I was eight months into my pregnancy, I entered a facility for unwed mothers, hiding my pregnancy from my family. When the facility contacted my older brother, he was stunned. When I told him I intended to raise my child, he vehemently objected—for fear of how shocked my parents would be—and recommended adoption. I was quite confused as I prepared for childbirth at the maternity facility. Although I had decided to raise my child on my own, my heart staggered at the thought of my parents. And so, with my due date approaching, I searched for adoption agencies with help from the facility staff.

¹ This is the script of a presentation given at the 60th Women's Policy Forum held on February 24, 2010 at the International Conference Hall of the Korea Press Center, Seoul, Korea under the theme of "Reality of Unwed Mothers and Support for Self-Reliance." The event was hosted by the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI) and sponsored by the Korea Unwed Mothers Support Network (KUMSN). The English translation of this script was made possible with support from Dr. Boas.

Today, I want to share with you the experience of unwed mothers who have consulted with adoption agencies as they approached their due dates. My presentation is based on my own personal experience and the experience of four other mothers who had consulted with the agencies for their child's adoption under circumstances similar to mine. When unwed mothers give birth to their children, they must make the most important decision of their lives even though they are in extremely challenging psychological and physical conditions. Rather than providing detailed information pertaining to child-rearing and adoption to help unwed mothers make their difficult decision, adoption agencies recommend that these mothers put their children up for adoption as soon as possible. I am presenting the stories of these unwed mothers because I strongly believe the counseling services provided by adoption agencies must be improved.

Data Collection Process

Five Mothers Who Changed Their Minds and Brought Their Children Back from Adoption Agencies after Initially Giving Them up for Adoption

	Current Residence	First Consultation with Adoption Agency	Residence Shortly Before/After Childbirth	Birth Date of Child
Case 1	Seoul	Eight Months Pregnant	Facility	August 12, 2005
Case 2	Goyang City	Eight Months Pregnant	Facility	October 2, 2005
Case 3	Incheon	Nine Months Pregnant	Facility	March 19, 2008
Case 4	Seoul	Four Months after Childbirth	Home	July 18, 2008
Case 5	Seoul	Eight Months Pregnant	Facility	Feb 20, 2009

With the belief that counseling services offered by adoption agencies must be improved, I started collecting stories of mothers who had initially decided to put their children up for adoption but later changed their minds. I met three of the five mothers included in the cases on January 31, 2010 at the conference room of the Korea Women's Development Institute (KWDI) and recorded their interviews. I spoke with the other two mothers over the phone and explained the purpose of collecting their stories. They sent me their stories in writing via e-mail and subsequently sent two revised versions which I edited.

Stories of Unwed Mothers

My Baby Has Two Birthdays

Let me introduce my story first. After preparing for childbirth at a maternity facility in Seoul, I gave birth to my son at a hospital on August 12, 2005, at 02:47. I had worked until I was six months pregnant, but as my pregnancy became evident, it was difficult to continue working due to the way my colleagues perceived me and concerns surrounding my pregnancy. The way I was perceived by my family and others, my fear of giving birth, and economic difficulties led me to enter a maternity facility for unwed mothers on June 12, 2005. I had learned that I was three months pregnant after I broke up with the father of my child. The pressure of having to raise my child alone as an unwed mother, the prejudice of our society toward unwed mothers, the fear of my family finding out about my pregnancy, and the associated guilt made me struggle between the choice to raise my child on my own or give him up for adoption.

While staying at the maternity facility prior to giving birth, I spoke with three adoption agencies to get information about adoption. At the time, I wanted to be able to keep in touch with my child through his adoptive parents—exchange photos, talk on the phone, and meet with him in person—so that I could see how he was growing up. Therefore, I tried to find an adoption agency that would understand and respect my wishes. The first agency explained

closed and open adoption and noted that most domestic adoptions were closed, while most international adoptions were open. The staff from the agency listed the pros and cons of domestic and foreign adoption. The advantage of domestic adoption is that the child grows up thinking that the adoptive parents are his/her biological parents. The disadvantage is that the child might find out about his/her birth mother later in life and try to find her. If the birth mother has started a new family, contacting her might be problematic as her privacy could be invaded. The advantage of overseas adoption is that the child grows up in an environment free of bias toward adoptees and the birth mother can keep in touch with her child. The disadvantage, however, is that the child grows up among people of a different ethnicity.

I was told that with open adoption, the birth mother could receive photos of her child, enabling her to see her child grow up. The first two agencies I consulted told me that I would be able to see my child only after he reached adulthood. The social worker from the third agency said that the agency would find a family that would allow me to see my child whenever I wished. I decided to give my child up for adoption through the third adoption agency as I believed that, among the three agencies, it best understood my position. All three adoption agencies sent social workers to the facility in which I was residing. The first two agencies visited me once, while the third agency visited twice. The first counseling session with each agency lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The social workers from all three facilities urged me to fill out an adoption agreement form and a memorandum for termination of parental rights during the first counseling session. I felt uncomfortable doing so and refused to sign the documents during the sessions with the first two agencies. When meeting with the social worker from the third agency, which I had selected for the adoption process, I filled out the documents without signing them and the social worker took them to her office. This was approximately one month before my delivery. The adoption agreement form requested a variety of information about me and the child's father: hobbies, education, skills, family relations, blood type, favorite flower and color, physical measurements such as height and weight, and favorite food. As the social worker

collected the form, she told me that the child's father and I had favorable features and that my child would soon find a good family. The social worker then chatted with me for about five more minutes. This was all the counseling I received from the agencies.

Although I had only requested a consultation with the agencies and had not determined to give my child to another family, the adoption agencies urged me to fill out an adoption agreement form and a memorandum for termination of parental rights. Even after I told them that I had not made that decision, the agencies tried to persuade me to fill out the forms, telling me that I could sign them later, if and when I made the decision.

I gave birth earlier than anticipated, on August 12, 2005, about three in the morning at a hospital near the maternity facility. Before I went to the hospital, I contacted my brother and he came to see me. He still opposed my raising the child, which led me to think that I should give the child up for adoption. I contacted the adoption agency's social worker in charge of my case on the morning I gave birth. The social worker was busy that day and a different social worker came to visit me. She dropped by around 11:00 and asked me to sign the adoption agreement form and memorandum for termination of parental rights, which I had filled out during the last counseling session. In addition, she had me sign a statement saying that if the child's father brought suit to claim his parental rights, I—as the child's mother—would take full responsibility and had me sign the statement. All of this took place in the hospital corridor in front of the infant unit where I was able to catch a glimpse of my baby. Aside from looking into his eyes shortly after giving birth, this was the only time I saw my baby before sending him away. The social worker had wrapped the baby in a quilt and taken him away while I returned to the unwed mothers' facility. It was only lunchtime when I came back to the facility after having given birth to my child and given him away.

When I returned to the facility, I felt numb. After one or two hours, I realized that everything was the same except that my child had left my womb. From the morning I gave birth to the next morning, I did not sleep. I spent the night tossing and turning. I felt as if I had dumped my baby in a wasteland or the trash. When the sun came up, I spoke with a staff

member at the maternity facility about my wish to bring my child home and then I called the adoption agency. The social worker at the agency criticized me for reversing my decision. I was very upset when the social worker told me that this would cause much inconvenience for the agency in terms of processing the related documentations. I shouted at her, asking what was wrong with a mother wanting her child; what was the problem with bringing my baby home when he was not yet adopted? The social worker replied that the person in charge was on vacation and that I should come back on August 17.

During those four days—from the day I decided to keep my child to August 17, the day I went to find him—I ached to see my baby and could not stop worrying that something might happen to him. It had been five days since I had given birth and I had seen my child only twice. My heart pounded with my longing to see my son. Finally, the 17th of August arrived and I called the agency for directions. "Ask someone else, or look it up on the internet," was the only reply I received. I took a cab and arrived at the adoption agency. I found my baby lying alone in a temporary protection facility within the agency. He was lying alone in a large, desolate room. I rushed to pick him up and bring him home with me. It tore me up to see my child alone in that room, and to this day I vividly remember that desolate image.

On the way back to the facility on August 17, 2005, I said to my child, "You are born again." Although I didn't know what lay ahead for us and was concerned about our future, I could not help but feel sincere joy. I no longer worried about my parents' reaction or the cold shoulder I would receive from people in my community. I had once heard a saying that until a baby reaches his 100th day from birth, the baby and the mother are practically a single being. I felt this was true; I felt as if I had indeed left a part of myself elsewhere for a short while. As a way of apologizing to my baby and compensating for the lost five days, I have been writing him a letter every month. The letters are sealed in an envelope for my child to read later on. I recently finished my 58th letter.

The services that adoption agencies provide to unwed mothers who must make the biggest decision of their lives—whether or not to give up their parental rights and send their

children to another family—are in fact cruel. When I was placed in a very vulnerable situation shortly before giving childbirth, the adoption agency urged me to give my child up for adoption. They give no consideration to the aching hearts of the mothers who must send their children away, and their services should be revamped.

Ready-Made Maternity and My Child

I am 27 years old and raising my six-year-old son in Ilsan of Goyang City. I am in charge of employee education at a local company. On August 1, 2005, eight months into my pregnancy, I entered a maternity facility. My due date was in early October 2005. I had broken up with the father of my child and entered the facility to hide from him. My parents did not want me to raise the baby on my own and I was torn between keeping him and putting him up for adoption. After I decided to give my child up for adoption, I requested counseling with an adoption agency. A social worker came to see me at the maternity facility. During our first meeting, she asked me to fill out an adoption agreement form and memorandum for termination of parental rights.

The document required detailed information about the child's parents, such as their likes and dislikes. The social worker recommended domestic adoption, urging me to send my child to one particular couple whose blood types were identical to mine and my boyfriend's. I wanted to keep in touch with my child so I told the social worker that I preferred overseas adoption. However, the social worker continued to urge me to send my child to that particular couple, saying that our blood types matched and the couple had good, stable professions as pharmacists.

When I continued to insist on overseas adoption, the social worker began explaining its disadvantages. I felt that from the very first meeting, the social worker was bent on persuading me to give my child to a family she had selected prior to our meeting rather than taking into the consideration what I wanted. I met with the social worker for two more

counseling sessions, but she spent most of the time during both sessions trying to change my mind.

I gave birth to my son on October 2, 2005, at 16:22 at a hospital adjacent to the maternity facility. I contacted the adoption agency the following day and the social worker came to the hospital between 10:00 and 11:00. She had me sign the adoption agreement form and the memorandum for termination of parental rights and took my child away. I also had to attest that I would assume all responsibility in case the child's father brought a lawsuit claiming his parental rights. The social worker emphasized that the adoption agency would be free from all liability if such a legal dispute arose.

I felt empty and hollow after sending my child away. I missed my baby so much that I decided to bring him back. On October 6, 2005, exactly three days after I sent him away, I went to the adoption agency to find him. The social worker at the agency insulted me, saying, "Do you want to raise your son as a bastard?" She also told me that I needed a letter of consent from my parents even though I was not a minor. After seeing how determined I was to recover my child, the social worker told me that the documentation process had not been finalized so I could take him after I paid a fee for keeping him at the facility. I paid a total of KRW 60,000—KRW 20,000 per day for the three days that he stayed at the adoption agency—and was able to hold my baby in my arms again.

I recall that rather than providing sincere counseling on child-rearing or adoption options, the adoption agency provided counseling with only the agency's best interests in mind. I am currently married to the father of my child and living happily with my son and husband.

The Longing for My Child Kept Me Going through 10 Months of Waiting

I was born as the eldest child in my family and grew up in rural Korea. I left my family to live alone in the metropolitan area for the first time when I entered college. Placed in a situation where I had to do everything on my own after being taken care of by my family for so long, I felt lonely and forlorn, and I found myself depending on the boyfriend I met at my

first workplace. We eventually broke up, but five days after our break-up I realized I was six months pregnant.

I was too young to know what to do. I had never imagined that what I watched on television could happen to me. I met with my ex-boyfriend, but his response was cruel and cold. He told me that I should look for a hospital and take care of the situation myself as we had already broken up. After contemplating alone, I found a hospital that performs abortions but the doctor proposed that I carry the child to term as I was far into my pregnancy. I had an ultra-sound, and the moment I heard the sound of my baby's beating heart I knew I could not go through with the abortion.

The problem was, however, I couldn't bring myself to tell the truth to my parents. As the eldest child, I didn't want to disappoint them and I was too ashamed to face my younger siblings. I concealed my pregnancy, quit my job, and found part-time jobs to earn my living expenses. However, the heavier I became, the more difficult it became to work from early in the morning to late into the night. Tears came to my eyes. The work was tough and I was physically and mentally exhausted.

With just one month to go before my due date, which was in February 2008, I thought about where I would stay after I gave birth. At the time, I was living in a *Gositel*, which is a very small room you can rent for a temporary period at a bargain price. The room was so small that one person could barely lie down. I had no home, and although I worked part-time, I didn't earn enough to save any money. I stayed at a location near to where the father of my child lived and waited for him to change his mind about the baby. But when things did not turn out as I had hoped, I felt that I had no choice but to place my child for adoption. In February 2008, almost near my due date, I contacted an adoption agency that I had found on the Internet, to receive some information on adoption. The compassionate voice of the social worker on the other end of the line felt so comforting. When I told her that I was thinking of adoption, she kindly provided basic information on adoption and recommended that I visit the agency in person. She also told me that I should bring a copy of my Korean resident

registration form and a copy of my family relations certificate, which are official documents that can prove my identity and family relations.

After much contemplation, I visited the adoption agency on March 3, 2008, one week after I had made the phone call. After a counseling session which lasted about 30 minutes, the social worker handed me an adoption agreement form and a memorandum for termination of parental rights and asked me to sign them. I did not want to because the baby had not even been born. When I refused, the social worker told me that I could fill them out later and recommended that I enter a facility for unwed mothers. I was in my last month of pregnancy and was feeling quite vulnerable. On top of that, everything seemed to be happening so fast; I felt scared and refused everything the social worker suggested. She tried to reassure me and told me that she was concerned for me because I would be alone and in a more challenging situation than the women at maternity facilities when my contractions began. She said that she could introduce me to an obstetrician who could give me an oxytocic injection so that I could give birth earlier than the due date. All expenses for examinations, childbirth, and hospitalization would be covered by the adoption agency. As I was in an economically difficult situation, her words seemed comforting, especially because it was the first time since I had been on my own that anyone had treated me with such kindness. But still I could not help feeling confused and uneasy. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to do as the adoption agency suggested, as I had no one to look after me.

On March 19, 2008, I decided to give birth earlier than scheduled, as proposed by the adoption agency. However, I still couldn't bring myself to sign the adoption agreement form and memorandum for termination of parental rights. The social worker in charge of my case assured me that I could always change my mind about giving up my child for adoption. I filled out the forms and received the oxytocic injection. Later in the afternoon, I gave birth to my daughter.

The next day, the social worker came for the baby. She told the father of the child, who came to the hospital upon hearing the news that I had given birth, to sign the same documents

that I had signed. As she handed over the documents, she told him that "This is what the mother wants, so all you need to do is sign the papers." He did as the social worker requested without having enough time to thoroughly read through the documents. The father of my child signed the papers without receiving any information about adoption. Upon signing the papers, my child had to leave me.

As I left the hospital on March 24, 2008, I realized that I could not live without my child. I went to the adoption agency and stated that I wanted to revoke my adoption decision and take my child home with me. However, the social worker refused to give me back my child, who had been placed in a temporary protection facility within the agency, saying that all of the paperwork had been completed and it was now a closed case. I had not fully recuperated from giving birth and my body, especially my back, ached all over. Frail and pale-faced, I visited the adoption agency almost every day, begging the staff to give me back my child. Nevertheless, they continued to refuse, repeating the same words.

On April 16, 2008, the child's father and I visited the adoption agency together after learning that the agency had found an adoptive family for our child. We begged to have our child back but the social worker urged us to go through with the adoption, questioning what would be best for the child given our financial conditions and child-rearing environment versus the adoptive family. Furthermore, the social worker told us that if the adoption was delayed for five to six months from the date of birth, my child would be designated as an orphan on her birth certificate. In that case, she explained, regardless of whether the child was sent for adoption, she could not be properly registered under anyone's family registration certificate. If I took the child to the municipal office to register her as my child, she would still be registered as an illegitimate child. The social worker urged me and the baby's father to make a decision as soon as possible. We hesitated in making the decision and, during that time, the couple who had wanted to adopt my child adopted a different baby. After this incident, the attitude of the social worker became even more forceful.

On May 1, 2008, I visited the social worker again, crying and pleading with her to help me take my child home with me. I asked her if I could leave the baby with a foster mother while I saved enough money to raise her. The social worker told me that by law foster mothers are only allowed to take care of children whose paperwork for adoption has been finalized. When I told her that I had found a facility that could take care of my child while I worked to save enough money to raise her, the social worker informed me that that particular facility only took in physically or mentally challenged children. As I continued to plead, the social worker told me that I could take my child home if I paid a fee of KRW 20,000 per night for keeping her at the agency as well as all the expenses incurred at the hospital. Another condition, however, was that I normalize my ties with the baby's father and bring my parents and his to the adoption agency. At the time, I was not in a situation to receive the approval of my parents or the father's parents. Therefore, I told the social worker that given my circumstances it would be difficult to satisfy the conditions. The father and I could no longer oppose the adoption and finally agreed to send our baby away. On May 13, 2008—within a week of giving my consent for adoption—my baby was sent to her adoptive parents.

The social worker made me feel inferior throughout the counseling sessions, comparing my situation to that of the adoptive parents. She kept telling me to consider under whose care the child would flourish. It was obvious at the time that the couple who wanted to adopt my child was prepared to raise a child while I clearly was not. The counseling session with the adoption agency was intended to persuade me to give up my baby. The conditions the adoption agency imposed on me were impossible to satisfy; the agency had laid forth conditions that could only be satisfied by maintaining an amicable relationship with the child's father, which at the time was difficult for me to do.

After sending my daughter to her adoptive parents, I became a member of an internet community for unwed parents who had placed their children for adoption. I was able to obtain a lot of information I had not been aware of previously from this internet community. I

learned of one case where an unwed mother stayed with her child at a facility for more than a year because she could not make up her mind about whether she should give her child to another family. I also discovered facilities where unwed mothers could stay temporarily until they became financially independent. I learned that what the social worker had said about my child being registered as an "orphan" in her official birth records had been a lie. The website revealed that considerable numbers of unwed mothers who knock on the doors of adoption agencies are forced into making a hasty decision to give up their babies. Around this time, the father of my child finally made up his mind that he wanted to raise the child with me. He told me that he felt terrible for the child and me and realized that the only way the three of us could be happy was for us to get married and raise our child.

On July 18, 2008, we visited the adoption agency again to ask how we could get our child back, but we met with the same response. "There was nothing wrong with the [adoption] process, and because we have a legal obligation to protect the privacy of the adoptive parents, we cannot give you any information," was what the agency told us. We petitioned to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and sought help from others by letting them know of our case. We fought long and hard against the adoption agency. Finally, in March 2009—10 months after our child had been adopted by another family—we were able to bring our baby home. Although the joy of getting our child back was unimaginable for us, the adoptive parents who had raised her for 10 months were left in agony. The adoption agency fiercely criticized us for sending the child away for adoption only to take her back. The agency's staff didn't seem to realize how its inappropriate counseling had caused pain for both the biological and the adoptive parents. Looking back, I feel that the people from the adoption agency who consoled me with kind words during my first counseling session had done so only to persuade me to give up my child and to discourage me from trying to get my child back. I cannot understand this reality in which social workers try to dissuade birth mothers from raising their own children. Why is it that these people, who should place the best interests of the children above everything else, are so negative about the birth parents raising their own children?

Seeing You Again after a Huge Tidal Wave

I met the father of my child when I was stationed overseas for work in 2007. In mid-November, I was devastated to discover that I was one month pregnant. The father of the child, however, persuaded me to have the baby. His parents had passed away when he was young and he said that he would take care of my parents as if they were his own. He wanted to get married with the blessing of my parents and our relatives and suggested that we raise our child in the country in which we were residing, which was known for its outstanding education system. All his promises won me over and I agreed to marry him.

I decided to have the baby because of the promises he made, but his business plans did not work out. In fact, I had to take care of all our living expenses and other financial obligations. My mother strongly urged me to get an abortion, saying that I should not go through with the marriage I did not want because of a pregnancy. But I refused to do as my parents wished because I had faith in my boyfriend and sincerely wanted to have the baby. I spent every day in tears waiting for my parents to support my decision. In early January 2008—when I was four months into my pregnancy—I fought with my boyfriend and went to the hospital for an abortion. However, we made up before I met with the doctor and promised each other that we would do our best to provide a wonderful home for our child.

Unfortunately, my boyfriend's business continued to struggle and he became even more uncertain about receiving the approval of my parents. In late May 2008, he persuaded me to go back to Korea and wait for him. He told me that he would turn his business around in one month and receive my parents' approval so that we could start our family life with our child. I was seven months pregnant at the time. I did as he asked, but my boyfriend had not come to see me by the time I went into labor. He made one phone call and sent four text messages telling me how sorry he was for not being by my side. I attempted to give birth naturally but the despair and devastation of having to give birth alone deprived me of all my strength and I eventually ended up giving birth by cesarean section, which was carried out after my sister signed the consent form for surgery. At 21:07, I gave birth to my daughter.

I met my daughter for the first time in the surgery room and she was just as I had imagined her to be. The emotions of joy and wonder that I felt that day are something only a mother can understand. The nurse placed my daughter near me so that her mouth could touch my nipples, explaining that babies remember their first touch. This was when I promised my daughter, "I will do anything to keep you safe." The anesthesia then overwhelmed me and I fell asleep. The next day, tears flooded my eyes as I lay in the hospital bed listening to the sounds of early morning rain.

The father of my child severed all ties with me the day after I gave birth to my daughter. I tried to find him through acquaintances and, about one month after giving birth, I discovered the many lies he had told me. Although it was difficult for me to trust him, I felt that my child needed her father and so I began preparing for the day he would return. But the promise he had made—to provide me with childbirth and childcare fees as well as a place to live—was not fulfilled.

My parents opposed my marriage to the father of the child, citing his financial inability and tendency to disappear and cut off contact with me. They tried to persuade me to give my child up for adoption. In turn, I tried to persuade them that I could raise my child on my own as I had work experience and knew how to take care of myself. However, my parents told me that I should put my child up for adoption as I would never be able to sever ties with him if I kept the child. Each month, they would give me an ultimatum, telling me that "making a decision as soon as possible is best for the child." "If you choose to keep your child, leave us and sever all ties with your family," they said. My mother fell into a severe depression after hearing that I had decided to raise my child. I felt a deep sense of guilt for the heartache my parents were experiencing. My father had told other members of my family not to hold the child because we did not know if we were to keep her.

Not only did I face strong opposition from my family but I also faced considerable financial woes. I had used up all of my savings and pension funds and did not have enough money to buy clothes or baby formula for my child. I decided that I needed to achieve the

minimum economic ability to raise a child to win the support of my parents. However, after months of job searching, I hadn't even been offered a job interview. It was wonderful to watch my daughter grow, but my sense of guilt was also growing and harsh reality was overwhelming.

In November 2008, when my child was four months old, I finally found the job opening that I had been searching for. Because I was living in Busan, I had to have someone babysit my child while I went to Seoul to take job entrance exams. My family had continuously begged me to get counseling about adoption, and I finally decided to contact an adoption agency for information about child-rearing. I contacted an agency, stated that I wanted to raise my child on my own, and inquired about maternity facilities in Busan that looked after children while the mother went to work. The counselor told me that although there was one facility that provided childcare services during the day, I did not qualify as the service was limited to mothers who were currently employed. Furthermore, there was a long waiting list to receive services at that facility. I contacted another adoption agency to learn about adoption options and made an appointment to visit the agency on November 21, 2008.

But with just one day left until the deadline for submitting my application for the job opening, I became anxious. At noon on November 18, which was a Tuesday, I pledged that I would get the job and persuade my parents of my ability to raise my daughter once and for all. I found an adoption agency that was just one bus stop away, and it seemed trustworthy enough to leave my child there during the job application period; I requested an appointment on the same day. A social worker visited my home at 3 p.m. that day and collected information such as personal information about me and the child's father, our preferences, family relations, and current situation. She then had me fill out an adoption agreement form and memorandum for termination of parental rights. It took approximately one hour to complete the counseling and fill out the forms. The social worker also requested that I write on the back of the memorandum that the birth mother would assume all liability if a dispute over parental rights of the child arose, given that there was no written consent for adoption

from the child's father. She asked for me to sign the paper and I did as I was asked. I then went to the municipal office to get a number of auxiliary documents required for the adoption process. The entire process to this point had only taken around an hour and a half. Everything had taken place in such a short period of time.

The counselor told me that it could take some time for my child to be adopted as she was already four months old and not a newborn. All I had in my mind was to get a job as soon as possible so that I could persuade my parents and bring my child home. When I sent my child to the social worker, I asked her to contact me if the agency found someone interested in adopting my baby. Then, I headed to Seoul. The very next day I submitted my job application and prepared for the job entrance exam. On November 21, 2008, which was a Friday, I called the social worker who had provided counseling for my child's adoption process and asked how my daughter was doing. She said that my child was doing well at the foster family home and that she was receiving a lot of love and attention from the foster family. The social worker verified which vaccinations my daughter had received under my care and informed me of the additional vaccinations she had received.

Ten days later, on November 28, 2008, while I was preparing for the second stage of the job entrance exam, I received a text message that my child had been adopted. The social worker in charge had been out of the office on a different case when a couple had dropped by the agency. They took a look at my child and adopted her on the spot without taking time to deliberate their decision. My heart dropped as soon as I read the message. I immediately contacted the adoption agency and stated that I wanted to take back my child. The social worker, who knew my situation all too well, including the fact that I was currently unemployed, told me that the legal process for adoption had been completed and there was nothing I could do to revoke the adoption. She noted that there were no procedural issues that could be raised against the adoption and questioned what I could do for the child as a mother. Feeling despair, I asked the adoption agency to reconsider, complained, and pleaded for their sympathy.

The reality seemed bleak but I did not give up hope that I would be able to bring my baby home. To contact the adoptive parents, I asked the social worker if I could send my child a gift. She seemed to feel bad for me and said that she would ask the adoptive parents after some time passed. She explained that the adoptive parents might feel uncomfortable with my request. In mid-December 2008, the agency contacted me to tell me that the adoptive parents would like to receive photos of my child when she was very young. I asked if I could see recent photos of my child. In early January 2009, I received a number of photos of my daughter from the adoptive parents. Meanwhile, I had finally succeeded in winning support from my older sister and her husband and had submitted a petition to the Ministry of Health and Welfare to recover my child. I also searched for people who had undergone a similar experience. During this process, I was able to find a job at my old workplace.

On January 23, 2009, to make my decision to raise my child official, I sent an email to the social worker describing why I had originally contacted the adoption agency and the content of the counseling I had received. I also called the social worker and expressed my determination to find my child, stating that I would rather die than live without her, and requested that the adoptive parents be informed of my position. I phoned or sent an email to the agency almost every day and demanded that the letter I had written be forwarded to the adoptive parents. However, the agency compared the environment I could provide for my child with that of the adoptive parents and refused to carry out my wishes. I asked why the agency had taken so lightly my request to be contacted before my child was sent to an adoptive family, but the only reply I received was that there was nothing wrong with the adoption process.

The agency told me to give up my endeavors to find my daughter as she was already officially registered as the daughter of the adoptive parents and she was growing up with much love from parents who could provide her with a good living environment. The agency also noted that information about the adoptive parents was confidential and that the adopted parents had declined contact with me.

I spent my days fighting the adoption agency, wondering if indeed I would be able to see my baby's face again. Then one day, I dreamed that I was sitting on a sandy beach with a friend when a beautiful blue tidal wave came rushing toward me. My friend ran away in fear but I stood still in awe of the wave's beauty. I was overwhelmed by the wave but I felt no fear or intimidation. Rather, I felt a sense of serenity. The tidal wave broke, but I did not even get wet. Feeling refreshed and invigorated, I woke from the dream. After the dream, I felt confident that my baby would return home to me.

On February 13, 2009, I once again sent an email to the social worker who had been in charge of my case. The email described my strong desire to find my child as well as the details of the counseling I had been provided by the adoption agency. I also recorded my testimony concerning the counseling I had received from the agency's counselor and made written records. I continuously requested that the adoption agency make my position clear to the adoptive parents and emphasized in my letters (to the adoptive parents) that I had asked the agency to contact me before my child was adopted and that I had signed the adoption papers so I could leave my child in the care of the adoption agency for a short period. I was later able to contact the director of the adoption agency who had initiated my child's adoption. The director informed me on February 16 that, although my letters were not delivered to the adoptive parents, the director had contacted them via telephone and been told that they no longer wanted me to contact them. They were only willing to let me see my child when she was all grown up, and only if she was willing to meet me. I continued to plead with the director of the adoption agency and was promised that during her next visit she would try to explain my wishes once again to the adoptive parents.

On February 24, 2009, the director visited the adoptive family and told the parents that I wanted my child back. After returning from the visit, the director notified me that the adoptive parents asked if I had any plans to get back together with the father of the child. They were not willing to let the child go back to a family if the father wasn't present. I told the director that there was a possibility that we would be reunited. On February 27, 2009, I

heard from the director that the adoptive mother was now inclined to return the child to me. But it was still unclear whether the adoptive father and other family members would agree. Finally, on March 5, 2009, I received notice that the adoptive parents had considered my position and strong determination to find my child and decided to send her back to me. On March 6, 2009, I finally saw my baby girl again.

It took three months for me to get my child back. I was able to see her again only by persuading the adoptive parents through the adoption agency. Looking back, I feel that if I had been told of facilities that look after children of unwed mothers regardless of their employment status or been provided information on childcare support during the counseling session, I would never have been separated from my daughter. Also, if the social worker I asked to contact me had shared that information with other social workers and if the person who provided counseling to me was the same person who processed the adoption, my baby and I would never have undergone the pain of separation. I hope that sufficient information on childcare support services can be provided to mothers who want to raise their children despite challenging circumstances. Also, I hope that unwed mothers do not make hasty decisions about putting their children up for adoption based on pressure they receive from those around them. Adoption of your child is one of life's most important decisions for you and your child. Therefore, it is imperative that you take enough time to think the matter through before you make your decision. I hope that other mothers do not have to undergo the heartbreaking experience I underwent.

Allowed Only Thirty Minutes to See My Child

On November 27, 2008, I entered a maternity facility for unwed mothers located in Gyeonggi-do after consulting with the facility over the phone. I was seven months into my pregnancy at the time. When I first entered the facility, I was determined to raise my child on my own. But after entering the facility, I became aware of the negative perception that Korean society has about unwed mothers and my relationship with the father of the child deteriorated. This drove me to seek counseling about my adoption options. I received

counseling from an adoption agency three times before giving birth. During my last counseling session, which took place about one month before the birth, I was asked to fill out an adoption agreement form, a memorandum for termination of parental rights, and an agreement form stating that I would assume all legal responsibility if the father of the child claimed his parental rights.

On February 20, 2009, at 20:39, I gave birth to a healthy daughter by cesarean section. I did not notify the adoption agency of my daughter's birth. Three days later, on February 23, the adoption agency informed me that it would be taking my child and that I could see her at the maternity facility for one hour before she was taken to the agency. I later heard that after receiving a medical examination at the newborn unit in the adoption agency, my daughter had been sent to a foster mother. After being discharged from the hospital, I returned to the maternity facility where I resided for about a month for postnatal care. When I sent my daughter away, I had been quite calm because I had told myself that adoption was best for her. However, the reality of not being able to see my child by my side had not yet sunk in. But when I came back to the maternity facility and saw other mothers deciding to raise their children, I felt depressed and fell into deep sadness.

When I contacted the adoption agency after giving birth, the agency said that I would be able to see my daughter once a month if I wanted. The first month, I was able to visit her at the temporary childcare facility at the adoption agency. When I tried to meet her the second month, I learned that she had been placed with a foster family after receiving a medical checkup. The foster mother informed me through the counselor at the adoption agency that my daughter had a cold and I should schedule a meeting with her at another time. About two months later, when she was three months old, I was able to see my daughter again. Looking into her face at an office in the adoption agency, I felt a strong sense of responsibility for her and an equally strong will to raise her. Each month, I was allowed only 30 minutes with my daughter. When I requested more time, a social worker with the adoption agency declined, saying that the extra time would keep the foster mother waiting too long.

I grew up without a mother as my parents divorced when I was very young. Perhaps that is why I felt the urge to show my daughter what a mother's love is like. I also wanted to provide her with the love I never received from my parents. I finally determined that I wanted

to raise my child. I wanted to ask the agency to return my child since she had not yet been adopted, but I feared the agency would refuse. I spent days agonizing about how I should tell the adoption agency about my decision.

About that time, I discovered two online communities while web surfing. I learned through postings on these sites that some mothers had gotten their children back from an adoption agency after being in a situation similar to mine. On September 25, 2009, I requested help through the *Miss Mammamia* web site, an online community for unwed mothers. Reading the stories of mothers who had been reunited with their children after a long and hard fight made me think that perhaps I too might face considerable challenges in bringing my baby back home. I wrote that if I could bring back my child, who was staying with a foster family, I would be able to raise her well with a bit of support from facilities such as group homes for unwed mothers and maternity homes. I received advice from a mother who had recovered her child from the same adoption agency I had contacted.

On October 7, 2009, when I was about to make an official request to bring my daughter back home, I received a phone call from the social worker in charge of my case: My child was being adopted but I would be able to see her one last time. Agitated, I rushed to the adoption agency and stated that I wanted my child back. The social worker criticized me for consulting other sources such as the *Miss Mammamia* site rather than coming to the adoption agency to discuss revoking my adoption decision, and she recorded our conversation that day. The social worker told me that because I had chosen overseas adoption, a foreign couple had been selected as my child's adoptive parents and only issuing the tickets for their air travel remained to be done. She tried to change my mind, comparing the conditions of the adoptive parents with mine and questioning what would be best for my daughter. I persisted that I wanted to raise my child on my own and the social worker asked me to think over where I would live if I were to raise her. I told her I would think over the matter carefully and agreed to meet her one week later.

When I revisited the agency on October 14, 2009, at 15:30, the adoption agency had not brought my child back from the foster family. The social worker told me that she had not brought the child because she did not know what decision I would make. I became furious upon hearing her words and demanded to see my child right away. I had clearly stated my

intention to raise my child, but the adoption agency had not brought the child to me as I anticipated. I interpreted the agency's action as disregarding the will of the birth mother. My resolute stance and continuous demand to have my child back finally prompted the social worker to call the foster mother, and at 16:30 that same day, my daughter was brought to the adoption agency. On October 14, 2009, after being separated for eight months, I was able to see my child again.

Having grown up without my mom, I do not know what kind of mother would be the best mother for my child. But I have pledged to provide my child with everything I always wanted from my mom, and I am living my life to its fullest with my daughter. Although I do not have a fancy house or an ideal living environment, I am doing my best to secure a bright future for my daughter and myself. I am the happiest mother in the world. I have a beautiful daughter who depends on me and, after being alone for so long, I finally have a family of my own. If I had sent my child away to an adoptive family, I would have lived all my life in guilt and longing for her. However, I am now living a totally new life because of my child, albeit with some hurdles along the way. I hope no mothers out there give up on their children because of the burdens of reality.

My Opinions on Adoption Service

I have introduced five different cases. Some people may already be aware of these stories while others may be quite surprised to hear them. These are the experiences of unwed mothers who visited or received counseling from adoption agencies from 2005 through 2009. When comparing the procedures of adoption agencies today with those of five years ago when I first received counseling on my adoption options, one can see that not much has changed: The agencies continue to encourage mothers to fill out an adoption agreement form and memorandum for termination of adoption rights and provide very limited, if any, counseling on the mothers' options.

The fundamental problem is that it is difficult to obtain accurate information concerning adoption and child-rearing from adoption agencies. Today, most unwed mothers search the internet to find information prior to giving birth. If they conduct a search on "unwed mothers," only a list of maternity facilities run by adoption agencies comes up on the

screen. Also, when consulting adoption agencies, mothers usually gain access to information pertaining to adoption but rarely receive information about child-rearing.

While Korea is the world's thirteenth largest economy, it is ranked fourth, as of 2007, when it comes to sending children overseas for adoption. In terms of the cumulative number of children sent overseas for adoption, it indisputably ranks first, having sent a total of 160,000 children since 1953. To clear its name as an "exporter of children," in 2006 the Korean government designated May 11 as Adoption Day; it now recommends that attempts to place a child with an adoptive family within Korea be made for at least five months before sending the child overseas for adoption. Meanwhile, well-known celebrities have been working as *Goodwill Ambassadors* to promote adoption, emphasizing the honor and virtue in adopting a child. As a result of these efforts, the number of domestic adoptions (1,388) exceeded overseas adoptions (1,264) for the first time in 2008. Nevertheless, three children per day are leaving the country to live with adoptive families abroad.

Birth parents and their children are completely excluded from the discourse over adoption. Adoption begins with the severing of ties between the birth parents and the child. Korean society tends to regard unwed mothers who put their children up for adoption as irresponsible and do not express interest in their experience. Adoption agencies say that "abandoned children are born in the heart." What mother would easily give up her child? We unwed mothers' hearts ache when we hear such words. In fact, unwed mothers are not given enough time or information to make their decision regarding adoption or child-rearing. Unwed mothers in Korea are not abandoning their children; they are sending them away because they have no other choice. A hidden aspect of adoption is the heartbroken biological parents who spend their whole lives in tears and guilt for their children.

Organization for Unwed Mothers: Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association

Accurate information on child-rearing should be provided to unwed mothers, who are frequently in desperate situations. Many mothers give up their children without even knowing what services they can receive from the government. To share information about the challenges that unwed mothers encounter and to provide mutual support, four unwed mothers

got together and created an organization for unwed mothers on March 14, 2009. On June 29, 2009, they opened an internet community called *Miss Mammamia*.²

As seen in the examples discussed, adoption agencies fail to provide appropriate services for unwed mothers. Adoption agencies should be separated from maternity facilities. What unwed mothers find mostly on the web is in fact information about maternity facilities run by adoption agencies. This inevitably makes it more likely that unwed mothers receive counseling geared toward adoption. But adoption should be the last resort for unwed mothers; they should have the opportunity to raise their children on their own and determine what is best for them. After receiving counseling centered on child-rearing, the mothers should also receive multiple counseling sessions so that they can make an informed decision about adoption.

As discussed during the November 10, 2009, public hearing hosted by the office of Representative Choi Younghee for revising *the Special Act on the Promotion and Procedure of Adoption*, adoption agencies must inform unwed mothers and fathers, when they request the parents to fill out the memorandum for terminating parental rights, that the form is not legally binding. Furthermore, agencies should not mislead parents with such a document. I believe that if unwed mothers are provided with sufficient counseling and time to consider their options, the adoption rate will drop dramatically.

In fact, 82% of unwed mothers residing in one particular facility that supports unwed mothers with childbirth, childcare, and counseling raised their own children, while only 37% who stayed in maternity facilities run by adoption agencies ended up raising their children. Furthermore, adoption agencies should not collect fees for temporarily keeping a child at their facilities while the child awaits adoption. For financially challenged unwed mothers and fathers, the need to pay such a fee can also serve as another reason to give up their child. Social perceptions of diverse families must also be modified and a public support system has to put in place to support more unwed mothers and fathers raising their children. Korea has the lowest non-marital birth rates among the OECD countries. Majority children who have been adopted are born to unwed mothers. Most children of unwed mothers are put up for

² <http://cafe.naver.com/missmammamia>

adoption because there is no proper social support system to assist the mothers with their children.

My child was born twice—once when I gave birth to him and a second time when I brought him back from the adoption agency. Some unwed mothers grieve for having sent their children for adoption and buy presents thinking of them every year on their birthday. Some think that when they stand before their grown children, they will feel they have done their children wrong, regardless of whether the children are leading successful or unsuccessful lives. If these unwed mothers had been provided with sufficient information on their childcare options, they might not have had to live with so much guilt. The mothers whose stories I have shared with you are here with us today. We hope that no more children and mothers have to experience the excruciating pains we have experienced. We unwed mothers are raising our children on our own, and we are women who take responsibility for our actions. We hope that our children will grow up to be bright, healthy individuals who go out into the world, fulfill their potential, and receive recognition for what they achieve. We are working very hard to make our hopes become reality. Thank you for allowing me to share my story with you today.