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Adoption: A Womyn's Issue

Mirah Riben
Adoption IS a womyn's issue.

Attend any search and support group for adoptees or birthparents in this country, and you will find the same thing: womyn outnumber men 10 to 1. For whatever reasons we wish to speculate, female adoptees and birthparents are obviously more curious, concerned and interested in finding their lost counterparts than are males.

In terms of birthparenthood, it is clear why womyn would be more affected and therefore carry a more continued interest than men. For men parenthood is merely speculation, while for womyn it is a very tangible fact of life that can no more be forgotten than it can be ignored. It is for this reason that men have sought for centuries to control womyn's sexuality and fertility.

Conception has always been a womyn's issue and a womyn's problem regardless of the fact that until recently, it required the physical presence (if not cooperation) of a male partner. No fertile womyn is ever safe from the possibility of unintended pregnancy, since there is no method of contraception that is 100% reliable. Even abstinence has its failures since rape exists.

Pregnancy and birth become even more of a womyn's issue for the single mother.

Womyn must take an active rather than a passive role in order to abolish the pregnancy. They cannot ignore it, block it out, deny its existence or its contribution to it, or walk away from it. They are the only ones capable of making the decisions to be made and whatever she chooses, a womyn's life -- from the moment of first conception -- will never again be the same as it was before no matter how the pregnancy ends.

Adoption is often one of the options offered to single mothers. She must choose, decide. Abort or raise, marry or remain single. For some choices -- difficult as they may be -- are the womyn's to make. For many, age, marital status, education and financial means limit the choices drastically. We live in a society which will, despite the inroads of Woman's Lib, exploits and victimizes its womyn. We live in a society that was founded on the principal that womyn and children are the property of men.

"In a male-dominated society, a woman's expression of sexuality is permitted only within strict bounds. Only when she is married and thus an appendage of a man, is sexual activity considered legitimate for her and accepted; indeed, it is expected at a husband's whim as his right. Those women who are sexually active before or outside of marriage, though, and that includes the majority of young womyn, risk severe punishment if they become pregnant. In America that punishment is adoption."

Pregnancy, within the sanctions of holy matrimony is a blessed and joyous event to be celebrated when it occurs and mourned when it does not. Joss Shaver, feminist and founder of the "Council for the Single Mother and Her Child" in Auckland, New Zealand, writes:

"The few single mothers I have known who survived pregnancy with their babies and person undamaged wore wedding rings when booking into antenatal class. As in inventing a fictitious, legitimately absent husbands (sailors are convenient), they enjoyed being fussed over by hospital staff whose only concern was that hubby couldn't be there to share in the joyous experience. Adoption was never mentioned and they met no social workers who were busy elsewhere routinely interviewing the 'unmarried' mothers."

Since for every adoptee there are two birthparents, it is estimated that some five to nine million womyn in this country have suffered the loss of a child or more to the exploitation of adoption. This is an on-going practice and one that has not ended. While it is true that fewer womyn today are faced with unplanned full term pregnancy due to advances in birth control and the availability of abortion, due to the increase in infanticide and the decrease in babies available for adoption, the pressure on women to surrender is every bit as strong, if not stronger, today as it has been for the past several decades.

There are new vocabularies to sugar coat the pill and presumably make it more palatable. Social workers are being urged to say "make an adoption plan" rather than "surrender" or "give up your child for adoption." And while anonymity and confidentiality were the hot selling points of the 60's, "Open Adoption" is the gimmick of the 80's. Open Adoption is promoted as a way to have the best of both worlds -- to be a Sunday parent. One can have the peace of knowing their child, obtaining photos, perhaps even visit in rare instances, without the daily "chore", responsibilities, and limitations of parenting. Just as we have learned twenty years after the fact that the womyn who gave birth to the 60's and were promised that they would "forget" and have "new lives", often did not; so too will the future discover that pictures do not replace the loss of the parenting experience which has now been documented to be the major cause of the bithmother's ongoing grief. (Nor will such openness -- though better than lies and secrecy -- allivate the adoptees' inevitable feelings of rejection and in some cases anger.)

What can we do to put an end to this aspect of the victimization of our sisters? Speak out! I would like to paraphrase a section of the conclusion to Gena Corea's wonderful book about reproductive technology, "The Mother Machine":

"Despite the unwillingness of a male supremacist society to hear us, we must speak out. We can speak out against any injustice suffered by womyn and, in doing so, contribute to the crystallization of womyn's well-being as a value. We can speak out in our conversations with others on the telephone, at a park, in line at the post office or the grocery store, in the office, the factory.

"It will not be easy for us at first. The issues surrounding (adoption) are confusing. Sometimes our heads spin. The benevolent
rational and images of kindly, smiling (adoptive parents and social workers) swirl around in our brains along with our sense that when we are called (selfish for loving and wanting our babies) all is not well. We are SUPPOSED to be confused. The confusion keeps us speechless and powerless. It is as a Native American friend once told me: Confusion is a tool of oppression.

"While we are struggling out of our confusion and into speech, we must stubbornly stay with our sense of uneasiness and think it through. We can not allow ourselves to be bullied into acquiescence with a 'tolerant' view of (adoption) simply because we are not yet able to fully articulate why the benevolent rationales for (ajlternder) clash with our sense of our own dignity and worth. We can stand stubbornly and say: 'Something is wrong here,' and explain that 'something' to the best of our ability. Each time we do it, we will get better.'

We can start by saying that a woman and her baby represent a basic family unit and that the strength of our nation lies in the strength of our families. Every adoption, no matter how good, begins with a tragedy. Every family which is formed or grows through adoption represents another which has failed to receive the financial and emotional support it needs to remain together.

Our generation of white middle and upper-middle class womyn and children has been exploited and torn apart. We as a sisterhood of womyn must now fight to prevent a continuation of the same destruction of the next generation through family separation. We can do more than speak about it. We can use the rights which we have fought so hard to obtain: the right to petition, the right to vote. We are living under a current administration which is PRO adoption, a self-righteous, religious, conservative, pro-life administration which sees adoption as a practice which needs to be PROMOTED among our pregnant teens while it shuns sex education in the schools, the dissemination of birth control without parental consent and other tentative measures. Instead of seeing public assistance as the duty of a society to help support its cast-out womyn and children, just as we have finally begun to provide access to our handicapped, our legislators see the poor as lazy, rather than as victims of circumstance -- often in need of temporary assistance rather than permanent solutions (i.e., adoption).

We must not allow womyn to be continued to be used as brood stock to provide babies for the wealthy and married. Just as society condemns unmarried pregnant womyn, it puts pressure on the married womyn to have children. We must not permit either. A womyn's desire and right to have children or not to have children must remain separate from her marital status. Womyn who want children but have lost their ability to function reproductively -- because of delaying childbearing, prolonged use of birth control, abortions and/or venereal disease -- are no more "deserving" to be a parent than their pregnant sisters who perhaps simply lacked their sophistication or luck.

Adoption, like so many other areas of exploitation and persecution, boils down quite simply to a matter of dollar and cents. The exploitation of the rich over the poor. Black and white, male and female, young and old -- in the American jungle it is survival of the richest. Money talks and nobody walks. We must put an end to the marketing of womyn and children as commodities being bought and sold on the streets and in the newspaper ads of our country like dogs and used cars.

Marsha Riben

1. Anderson, Carole, Eternal Punishment of Women: Adoption Abuse, Concerned United Birthparents
2. Sawyer, Joss, "Death by Adoption", Cicada Press, 1979
3. Harper & Row, 1985

POST SCRIPT

You might be wondering why I have taken the time to write an article which seems self-evident. Indeed it should be. However, it is interesting to note that this very article and others written on this subject have been rejected by Ms. Magazine and The Woman's Newspaper of Princeton. It seems that proponents of womyn's rights have little sympathy and/or agreement with the fact that adoption is a woman's issue. What do you think? How, can we broaden their view and enlighten them? Remember, that we must be patient. It took over 100 years for women's suffrage to get passed.

Marsha Riben

ORIGINS

AN ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN WHO HAVE LOST CHILDREN TO ADOPTION

P.O. BOX 444
EAST BRUNSWICK, N.J. 08816