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Crimes Against the Unmarried Mother In Canada Post WWII: The Collective Consciousness of Society

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The Collective Consciousness of Society: Crimes Against the Unmarried Mother in Canada Post WWII

After World War II countries including Canada, Australia, UK, and the United States created adoption policies which included illegal and unethical practices as well as human rights violations. This is being referred to by many as the “Baby Scoop Era” and mothers of that era as “BSE Mothers” (Wilson-Buterbaugh, 2002).

After both World wars, it became the social duty of women to provide offspring to re-populate the nation. During WWII, women in western societies were highly skilled workers in manufacturing and other sectors. When the war ended, the growth of the economy and the social fabric of society depended on women being in the home. Federal government propaganda and programs supported that model by financing and encouraging the growth of female professions such as Home Economics and Social Work. Social conventions of the time argued that “women’s most basic satisfaction came through service to others in the domestic sphere” (Strong-Boag, 1994). In Commonwealth countries, the new youthful monarch Elizabeth II and her family became an ideal to emulate. Birth rates increased dramatically eventually called “Baby Boomers”.

With the increase of car purchases, the ability to live further from employment and the city core became easier and suburbs were created. In this setting, women nurtured family life as men took on the role of provider. Popular culture supported this model through mass media and by way of popular “experts” such as Dr. Marion Hilliard of Women’s College Hospital who claimed women belonged in the domestic sphere “a cheerful and contented woman at home, even one who must pretend gaiety gives a man enough confidence to believe he can lick the universe” (Strong-Boag, 1994). Church attendance and enrolment in Church Schools was at an all time high and the morality of the neighbourhood was closely watched and enforced by the women in these suburban homes. “Good” women were constructed as married homemakers and mothers.

Unmarried pregnant youth and women were a blight on this idyllic society. Mostly in secret and hidden from public view even until today, the human rights violations and crimes against the unmarried mother have little been discussed, or acknowledged. The unmarried pregnant woman was in violation of societal expectations regarding sexuality and motherhood. As articulated by Joss Shawyer, “adoption is a violent act, a political act of aggression towards a women for committing the unforgivable act of not suppressing her sexuality, and therefore not keeping it for trading purposes through traditional marriage” (Shawyer, 1979). The social stigma for the “unwed mother” was severe.

Earlier in the 20th century, unmarried mothers were viewed as “fallen women” and their children as “Illegitimate”. Society scorned mother and child both legally and socially. At that time, mothers and babies were encouraged to stay together as unmarried mothers were considered to be “feeble minded” and their immoral behaviour thought to be hereditarily. Also, the importance of breast feeding for the prevention of infant mortality was a factor in mothers and babies staying together.

However, as the professions of Psychiatry and Social Work grew, new theories emerged. As pointed out by Kunzel “appointing themselves the new experts, social workers sought to claim the field of illegitimacy as their proper domain” (Kunzel,
The deviant mother was no longer considered to be feeble minded or morally unredeemable, instead she was ill. The unmarried mother could now be rehabilitated by keeping her pregnancy a secret, relinquishing her child for adoption and returning to society to fulfill her role as “bride, coquette and co-ed” (Solinger, 1992). Further, with a renewed emphasis in sociology on “tabula rasa” or clean slate theory, adopters were assured that hereditary immorality was no longer a threat. The availability and increasing acceptance of the use of infant formula allowed for babies to be separated from their mothers and adoptions increased.

A social experiment emerged whereby the unmarried mother would surrender her child for adoption to infertile women. The unmarried mother would simply forget about her child and be transformed from an aberration of society to a respectable and marriageable woman. She would have learned her lesson and paid her debt to society through punitive measures which included harsh and inhumane treatment designed to teach her not to duplicate her behaviour, including the loss of her child to adoption. A harsh punishment indeed. Dr. Marion Hilliard of Women’s College Hospital stated that “When she renounces her child for its own good, the unwed mother has learned a lot. She has learned to pay the price of her misdemeanor and this alone, if punishment is needed, is punishment enough.” (Toronto Telegram 1956).

Infertile women were also considered deviant in this post war mother driven society. Infertility post World War II was an area of medicine not fully explored and treatments were not as advanced as they are today. Also, service men returning from the war with venereal diseases contributed to infertility rates. In this social experiment, the infertile married woman would receive “the gift” of a child to carry on the ideal. The child would be considered “as if born to” with records altered and sealed, denying the right of adoptees to know their origins. These records were sealed for Adopters, and not to protect the privacy of unmarried mothers as governments would later attest. Adoptive mothers would live out the adoption myth, some to the point of delusion; justifying their actions as rescuers of a child who in fact needed no rescue. Society offered them adoption as a “cure” for their infertility, and they took it. Society would go back to normal, with a redeemed women in place to carry on to emulate the ideal of motherhood and an adoptive mother to do the same. All was well in the suburbs. But was it?

This “method” was endorsed by all aspects of society and each segment of society met the terms.

Christian religions and charitable organizations met the terms through the creation “Homes for Unwed Mothers” (Andrews, 2009), “Magdalene Laundries”, (Finnegan, 2004) “Reform Institutions for Wayward Girls”, and “Wage Homes” to house the deviant mothers and to redeem their souls by transforming them from Magdalenes to Marys. To enter these homes in most cases, mothers had to first register with Children’s Aid Societies which put them on a track to adoption. In these facilities young women were required to change their names and repress their identities. Many were required to wear apparel provided by the institution. Although not legally incarcerated, they were labeled inmates in government reports. Their movements, telephone
access, and visitors were restricted. Their mail was often censored. In these institutions unmarried mothers were subjected to physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. Their self esteem was systematically eroded. Their ability to parent was ridiculed and undermined and they were told their baby “would be better off” with strangers and that they should give their babies “as a gift”. These young women were required to attend religious services daily, and work as indentured servants even though governments paid per diem rates for their care. They were labelled sluts, whores, and sinners needing redemption. It was repeatedly enforced that redemption lay in the relinquishment of their child. These institutions were coercive in nature, psychologically grooming mothers for adoption and secrecy, as revealed by a Toronto Maternity Home Director “Mrs. L.H. Doering, Executive Director of the United Church’s Victor Home for Unmarried Mothers says they are counseling their girls not to keep their babies” (Toronto Star, 1965). These maternity facilities provided little if any information about labour and delivery. Young women were routinely dropped off by Maternity Home matrons at hospital admissions and left alone with little knowledge and no support for labour and delivery, rendering them terrified and traumatized. Many mothers returned to these homes post partum. Olivia Langford, the Executive Director of Humewood House in Toronto in 1963 stated, “At Humewood the girls return to the home for 10 days but do not bring their babies with them. They are taken for adoption without the mothers seeing them” (Toronto Star, 1963). The entire process was designed to make the experience so horrifying that they never returned since “repeaters” were not tolerated. It was also designed to make it easier to obtain signatures from terrified, traumatized, medicated, young women. Most of these facilities were either wholly or partially financed by provincial governments.

Hospitals (some run by religions) and the medical profession met the terms by keeping mothers separate from married mothers in hospital, by the use of restraints on mothers during delivery, by removing babies from their mothers “while still in the primal act of birth, still in labour, bound, awaiting the expulsion of the placenta culminating in a violent trauma to the female psyche from which no mother is able to recover” (Wellfare, 1997). Eye contact was prevented between baby and mother by the use of pillows, sheets or other apparatus, and lactation prevented by administering medications without consent and barbaric breast binding. Hospital staff and medical personnel sedated and drugged mothers, denied mothers free access to their own babies, removed babies to remote locations, and traded live babies with stillborns. Medical assault included extensive venereal disease testing and other tests without permission and unmarried mothers were commonly used as “teaching tools” for residents and others. Unmarried mothers were routinely exposed to sexual, verbal, and physical abuse in medical office settings and hospitals.

Governments met the terms by denying assistance to unmarried mothers. Government Social Workers, often in collusion with maternity homes, denied the deviant mothers all knowledge of their legal rights regarding parenting, adoption, foster care, and visitation. Overt and covert methods of coercion were used to obtain consents, and mothers were not advised of the long lasting severe psychological damage of separation to both mother and child which was known at the time. In 1966, Diane Kemp
of the Children’s Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto told other Social Workers at the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies that “unwed mothers who give up their children may mourn a lifetime” (Toronto Star, 1966). Information and resources readily released to visible minority mothers was withheld from Caucasian mothers as their babies were considered “blue ribbon babies”, a term used in adoption as a trade euphemism for a white, healthy infant (Gaily, 2010). Social workers consistently ignored mothers who explicitly stated they wanted to mother their children, and instead “groomed” mothers throughout their pregnancy to “unbond” (Ruane, 2003) with her child. Social Workers and Maternity Home workers referred to babies as “the” baby or “that” baby, never “your” baby to psychologically separate mothers from their babies. Social workers and Maternity Home workers presented adoption as the only “loving option” and used the term “realistic plan” as “adoptionspeak” in their notes. Surrenders were extracted using oppression, duress, threats, fear, trickery and falsehoods. “The mothers desperately wanted to keep their children and were perfectly capable as loving souls to do so, but were forced, literally, to surrender the most precious little one they protected and carried into full life from their own bodies. Between harassments, betrayals, demeaning treatment, being told they were incapable and withdrawing all resources in order to prove the point instead of bending to help keep mother and child united, the mothers and children were given no choice but severance.” (Estes, 2010).

Society met the terms by complicit agreement. Western culture refused to recognize the motherhood of unmarried mothers separated from their children by adoption, and condemned and judged them for having unprotected sexual relations outside of marriage. They were also constructed as cold uncaring mothers whose babies were unwanted and who had made a choice to “give them up” for adoption. Society also met the terms by constructing a multi-billion dollar adoption industry which promotes adoption in western society to create “forever families” for those who cannot create a biological child. “Regrettably, in many cases the emphasis has changed from the desire to provide a needy child with a home, to that of providing needy parents with a child. As a result a whole industry has grown, generating millions of dollars of revenue each year, seeking babies for adoption and charging prospective parents enormous fees to process the paperwork.” (Petit, UN Report, 2002).

When it was all over, society was satisfied, adoptive parents were satisfied, but what happened to the mother who was released from hospital without her child? Breasts flowing with milk, traumatized, stripped of her child and motherhood, still recovering from birth, told never to tell a living soul of her secret, told that she would forget about this child and would go on to have “children of her own” in the future, sent home without even a piece of paper in her hand as proof of the act, and no counselling to help her....a “throwaway mother”, a by-product. What happened to the child who was separated as an infant from his mother’s smell, heartbeat, voice, skin and touch....a child who lived with strangers and was supposed to be “grateful that his mother gave her away because she loved her”; a child who was never allowed to grieve his mother but was expected to just fit in “as if born to”; a child with no one to mirror; a child who felt different, abandoned and rejected. A child who becomes an adult adoptee who does not have the right to her records, and who risks being “a bad adoptee” or “ungrateful” for searching for her natural family.
In 2011, we know the answers to these questions. We know that the mothers never forgot their children. They suffered long lasting permanent effects including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Wilson-Buterbaugh, 2010), splitting of the psyche, unresolved and pathological grief, Clinical Depression, Post Partum Depression, Secondary Infertility, unresolved anger, and relationship issues. They suffered from Fibromyalgia, Migraines, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and other stress related illnesses due to the trauma and the secret they kept. The mothers never recovered.

Many of their children suffered abandonment issues, attachment disorders, unresolved anger, low self esteem, Clinical Depression, Unresolved and Pathological Grief, Post Partum Depression, (for women adopted persons), identity issues and more. We also know that these mothers and children search for each other in the thousands, which attests to the strength of their bond.

In recent years mothers began communicating with each other through social media and other resources. As they shared their stories they came to the realization that they were victims of a systemic plan with few differences in the method, particularly between Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom and the USA. There is a worldwide movement underway and the international group, Origins has been successful in obtaining a Federal Inquiry into these policies and practices in Australia which handed down their findings and recommendations on February 29, 2012. At Universities all over the world, students of History, Humanities, Sociology, Social Work, and Women’s Studies are beginning to write papers and books acknowledging this social history. No longer can the facts be ignored. “For people to heal, the truth must be revealed” (Desmond Tutu).

These events took place with the sanction of the collective consciousness of society. However, one must consider that many atrocities and human rights abuses take place with the sanction of societies. The Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, Canadian Residential Schools, are a few examples of human rights abuses which have occurred with the sanction of societies. The fact that a society endorses a policy or practice does not prove the ethical or moral value of that practice. The crimes, atrocities, and human rights violations against the unmarried mother cannot and will not be diminished or erased by implying they were norms and mores of society. In fact, the illegal and unethical acts perpetrated against unmarried mothers were also illegal and unethical during that period.

It is time that the stories of the mothers are told. It is time for validation and acknowledgment for mothers. It is time for governments, religions and others to take responsibility and to acknowledge their part in the forced separation of mothers from their beloved children. Some mothers are beginning to speak out, to move past their secret and their shame, but for many mothers this is still not possible. The shackles of the secret they were told to keep, the emotional trauma, and the shame still binds their soul, their spirit, and their very lives.

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