

**THE OTHER OFFREDS:
a different kind of “Handmaid’s Tale”**

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Infant Adoption is considered a “loving option,” but to unmarried mothers who have not been allowed to raise their own children the surrender of their infant to adoption has meant untold agony: loss, confusion, worry, irresolvable grief and a lifelong sense of non-reality and duality.

“You will return to your life as it had been,” social workers claimed. “You will get married and have more children, your *own* children,” they offered as some kind of warped consolation. The months of hiding, lying and pain “are behind you,” they counseled. These mothers believed them. After all, they were the authority figures. “You will forget ‘THE baby’ in time,” they promised. But could they... *really*?

Society has been hearing about the experiences and injuries suffered by these invisible, previously voiceless exiled mothers at the hands of a moralistic society and the people who earned their livelihoods from mother/child separation: maternity home and adoption agency social workers who had, and still have, the power to make God-like decisions that affect the futures of vulnerable single mothers and their babies.

The Baby Scoop Era

The period from the mid-1940s (post WWII) through 1972 is commonly referred to as the Baby Scoop Era (BSE). Closed adoption was considered the first and only choice for young unmarried girls who became “illegally” pregnant before sex education and birth control were easily obtainable.

Many decades ago these unmarried mothers who surrendered babies to adoption in record numbers were referred to as “unwed mothers.”

Ending with *Roe v. Wade*, the BSE pertains specifically to closed infant adoption practices. At no other time in our history have such huge numbers of newborns been surrendered to adoption by unmarried mothers.

The BSE has been documented in such books as *Wake Up Little Suzie* (Solinger, 1992) and *The Girls Who Went Away* (Fessler, 2006)¹, and the documentary *A Girl Like Her* (Fessler, 2012)². It also is the subject of the Australian documentary *Gone to a Good Home* (Berkman & Shapman, 2006).³ The Academy Award-nominated movie *Philomena* (Frears, S. & Coogan, S. & Pope, J., 2013)⁴, tells the story of Philomena Lee, an unmarried, pregnant girl, imprisoned in an Irish Catholic laundry that also served as a maternity home, who was forced to surrender her son to closed adoption. In 2012, the Dan Rather Reports news program aired “Adopted or Abducted,” featuring the experiences of some of these BSE mothers who surrendered their babies to Catholic agencies. The American news program was subsequently nominated for an Emmy.⁵

¹ Fessler, A. (2006). *The girls who went away: The hidden history of women who surrendered children for adoption in the decades before Roe v. Wade* (p. 143). NY: Penguin Press.

² Fessler, A. (Producer/Director). (2012). *A Girl Like Her* [Motion Picture]. United States: LEF Foundation, Moving Image Fund.

³ Berkman, Karen & Chapman, Mark & Film Australia. (2006). *Gone to a good home* [Television series episode]. In *Storyline Australia*. Lindfield, N.S.W.: Film Australia.

⁴ Frears, S. (Director), & Coogan, S. (Writer), & Pope, J. (Writer). (2013). *Philomena* [Motion picture]. United States: The Weinstein Company.

⁵ “Adopted or Abducted?” Dan Rather Reports. May 1, 2012. <http://www.axs.tv/news-and-docs/response-to-abducted-or-adopted/>

It has been estimated that during the BSE, the mid-1940s to 1973, up to four million mothers in the United States had surrendered newborns- possibly two million during the 1960s alone.⁶ However, the numbers could be larger as unmarried, pregnant females may have checked into hospitals under fictitious names and wearing fake wedding bands. In addition, early in the BSE, recordkeeping methods were lax and not generally required by agencies, hospitals and other entities.

According to the Encyclopedia of Social Work⁷, there was an increase in the yearly number of non-relative adoptions from an estimated 34,000 in 1951 to more than 89,000 in 1970. The numbers dropped to an estimated 47,000 in 1975. These were strictly closed adoptions by non-relatives. Comparatively, the United States Department of Health and Human Services estimated that only 14,000 infants were surrendered in 2003.

Unmarried females had little access to birth control methods and protection. They were generally unable to obtain information about reproduction, and sexual issues were not taught in schools as they are today. In public libraries, books and other materials on these topics were stored behind locked doors. The BSE was definitely not a time of easy access to reproductive information. There was no “Information Super Highway.”

After soldiers returned home at the end of World War II, society witnessed a bumper crop of babies, a group known today as the “Baby Boomers.” There were 2,858 million babies born in 1945. The number rose to 3,411 million in 1946 and continued to rise steadily to a high of 4,300 million until 1965 when births began to progressively decrease.⁸ Some soldiers returning from war

⁶ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_Scoop_Era

⁷ *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. (1976).

⁸ Why Is It Called a “Baby Boom?” (2015, October/November). *Boomer*, 26.

may have brought home sexually transmitted diseases that could have caused infertility, not only for them, but for their wives as well.

When young, unmarried females became pregnant, adoption workers convinced the public, through the media, that there was a real and growing crisis in unwed motherhood. An epidemic. However, since the population of teenagers increased during the Baby Boom period, the growth rate was simply a matter of an increase in population.

In a perfect storm of trends and events, the BSE experienced an increase in the number of teenage girls due to overall population growth, very limited access to birth control and information about reproduction among unmarried adolescents and young adults, an increase in infertility rates, and the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s.

During the 1940s, illegitimacy slowly began to be viewed in terms of a psychological deficit on the part of the unwed mother rather than as a moral problem. At that time, a more sexualized society that provided little information about birth control methods and imposed restrictions on their availability, experienced an increase in unwed pregnancies. The dominant view among professionals in psychology and social work was that the majority of these mothers were best served by taking their babies upon or shortly following birth, offering them as available for adoption.

Social work professionals began to see unmarried mothers as dangerous rather than as endangered. By considering both feeble-mindedness and sex delinquency, social workers could operate within prescribed boundaries that favored adoption: if mothers were too intelligent to be considered feeble-minded, they remained sufficiently defective to be separated from their children.

Over time, the perception of unmarried mothers as being sex delinquents resulted in a breaking down of the boundary between unmarried mothers and delinquents until these status designations became synonymous. Instead of helpless victims, these women were viewed as being willful violators of moral norms. This effectively shifted the burdens of guilt associated with unwed pregnancies from men to women. While social workers claimed to approach the subject of unmarried mothers with objectivity, public discourse ultimately coalesced around normalcy and deviance, and social workers more actively suggested that unmarried mothers surrender their children.

After World War II, there was a lucrative market for babies with adoption workers strongly encouraging unmarried mothers to release their children for adoption. The mission and philosophy of maternity homes changed in the 1950s and 1960s. Most homes served as places where pregnant girls were sequestered. Most were forced by personnel to use false or first names only. They were barred from contact with the fathers of their babies, friends and most family members. Their incoming and outgoing mail read and censored. After giving birth, the vast majority of these new mothers were released empty-armed and “as if” virginal. The staff made concerted efforts to convince any unmarried mother who was unsure or uninterested in adoption that this was the best, and even only, course of action.

The BSE was characterized by specific conditions, social structures and criteria designed to facilitate the removal of white newborns from white, unmarried mothers, which were then offered to married, white couples for adoptions. These included:

- The creation of a new professionalism in social work in the United States allowed workers to define and operate in the specialized field of infant adoption, regardless of their previous experience or training, and to declare themselves experts in unwed motherhood.
- The expansion of maternity homes in nearly every major city throughout the United States, particularly the Salvation Army and Florence Crittenton Homes.
- The evolution of staff at maternity homes from religious women whose aim was to help mothers keep their babies, to professional “adoption workers” interested in pressuring the mothers to surrender their children to meet the growing market demand for white infants among white, married adopters.
- A change in foster care from efforts to support both the mother and her child, who remained together, to a system of care that provided only for the newborn, effectively separating the mother from the child.
- An increase in infertility rates attributed to soldiers who returned from World War II with sexually transmitted diseases.
- Difficulties experienced by teenagers and other unmarried individuals in obtaining birth control methods like condoms or the pill.
- Lack of readily available or accessible information about reproduction among adolescents and young adults.
- Societal pressures to have a “perfect family” of two or more children tended to stigmatize childless married couples.
- The so-called “sexual revolution” that occurred in the 1960s.

Prior to the Baby Scoop Era

Until the BSE many mothers were helped to keep their babies. The Florence Crittenton homes, founded by Charles Crittenton and Kate Waller Barrett, were opened on the tenet of “keeping mother and child together.” Christian women ran these homes and offered a helping hand to their unfortunate sisters. They often took money, food and clothing to mothers after they left with their babies. Some mothers and babies stayed at the maternity home for a long period of time in order to get on their feet and leave with their babies.

In a book published by the National Florence Crittenton Mission, Dr. Kate Waller Barrett’s position was made clear, “Among maternity homes and hospitals, especially those of commercial character, it had been the almost universal custom to separate the illegitimate child from its mother, putting it out for adoption or handing it over to a foundling asylum. It was merely a badge of shame, to be bundled out of sight as quickly as possible, with scarcely a thought as to what might happen to the child or mother as a result of this unnatural tearing asunder. Against this practice Mrs. Barrett set herself positively and unreservedly.”⁹

Evolution of the Social Work Profession

Starting in the mid-1940s the helping hand approach began to change as the new profession of social work emerged. Those practicing in the field of adoption decided that they would carve out a niche for themselves as the experts in unwed motherhood. They began to write articles to

⁹ Wilson, O., & Barrett, R. (1933). *Fifty years' work with girls, 1883-1933: A story of the Florence Crittenton homes*, (p. 172). Alexandria, Va.: The National Florence Crittenton Mission.

convince the public that mothers should surrender their babies in order to return to their lives “as if” nothing had happened, so that they could essentially return to their lives as if virginal and be marital material. Because the public felt that these professionals would do a better job keeping the illegitimate explosion under control, these adoption workers began to insinuate themselves into the maternity homes. The Christian women helpers were no more.

From that point on, mothers were seldom helped to keep their babies but instead pressured and convinced that they should not and could not parent their own babies. Being young, frightened and without support of any kind, these mothers saw no other way out but to surrender their babies to adoption.

Long-Term Effects on the Exiled Mother

These exiled mothers were the unfortunate inheritors of guilt, shame and secrecy that invaded every aspect of their lives. Young, mostly teenage mothers, internalized their feelings of humiliation, unworthiness and blame. Without jobs or money to care for their babies, support from their families, help from the “punitive” fathers, or information about any state assistance, they fell victim to the power and suspect motives of social workers and other adoption professionals. These vulnerable females were fed a constant stream of negative messages while confined in maternity homes, from adoption lawyers, hospital workers and even their own doctors.

The moralistic audiotapes played relentlessly until these pregnant girls accepted as truth their new title: whore, neurotic, damaged, deviant, defective and abnormal. What *decent* girl would get pregnant without being married? Without alternatives, they succumbed to overwhelming pressures

and surrendered their children in record numbers. They remained silent for decades. Haunted by memories of ridicule and the fear of discovery, their profound sense of inferiority and worthlessness grew by the year. In their minds they were mutants; branded as unfit and not good enough to mother their own child. They felt false - not whole and unholy. The young girl-mothers remained frozen in time, their emotions never explored, their grieving never permitted or acknowledged. They held tightly to their anger and buried it deep along with the precious memories of their taken child. Many sank deeply into depression.

A Future of Offreds?

These thrown away and discarded mothers, in a sense, were also “Offreds,” like one of the handmaidens in Margaret Atwood’s famous book *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The fertile females in her fictional story resided in a herd of sorts to be rented out as sex slaves to infertile married couples who wanted children but could not naturally conceive. The maternity homes during the BSE instituted “wage” homes where pregnant unmarried females were assigned to live in a private home of a married couple. They were expected to clean, babysit and do virtually anything they were assigned. Most wage homes were directly connected with the maternity homes. Mothers were supposed to have been paid approximately \$10 a month by the married couples. However, rarely were wages paid.

The females in these scenarios were reproductively exploited. Both were used to fulfill someone else’s wish and supposed need.

Unmarried, fertile mothers around the world have been harvested for their newborns. Their newborns were then marketed and transferred to infertile married couples or other paying consumers (whether by fee or “donation”). These mothers were treated as brood mares. They too were breeders. Historical research regarding infant adoptions offers that Leontine Young, a well-known social worker, at a 1953 National Conference for Social Workers offered her opinion in “Is

Money Our problem?,” that there is, “[A] tendency growing out of the demand for babies to regard unmarried mothers as breeding machines (by people intent) on securing babies for quick adoption.”¹⁰ Young, the following year, shared that “Unwed mothers are in a... vulnerable position, [they are] exposed... to the condemnation of society and ...to the unscrupulous exploitation or well-meaning mistakes of those who want their babies... It is not always easy or possible to persuade the girl to surrender the baby, and the caseworker must beware of providing... an incentive for the girl not to use the baby in a tug of war with her.”¹¹

Enlightening as well is social worker, Helen Perlman who stated that, “Because there are many more married couples wanting to adopt newborn white babies than there are babies, it may almost be said that they, rather than out of wedlock babies are a social problem. (Sometimes social workers in adoption agencies have facetiously suggested setting up social provisions for more ‘baby breeding’).”¹²

Edward Shur offered the view of how stigmatized people are devalued and degraded: “Stigmatized persons... are little valued as persons... others may claim license, implicitly if not explicitly, to treat the stigmatized individuals in exploitative and degrading ways... treating them exclusively as ‘nonperson’s or mere objects’...”¹³

Reflecting on past adoption practices, historian Rickie Solinger shared that, “[F]or white girls and women illegitimately pregnant in the pre-Roe era, the main chance for attaining home and

¹⁰ Young, L. (1953). *Is money our trouble?* Paper presented at the National Conference on Social Work, Cleveland, OH.

¹¹ Young, L. (1954). *Out of wedlock; a study of the problems of the unmarried mother and her child.* (p. 198). New York: McGraw-Hill.

¹² Perlman, H. (1964). Unmarried mothers. In N. Cohen (Ed.), *Social work and social problems.* (p. 174) New York, NY: National Association of Social Workers.

¹³ Schur, E. (1983). *Labeling women deviant: Gender, stigma, and social control* (pp. 5, 31-32). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

marriage... rested on the aspect of their rehabilitation that required relinquishment... More than 80 percent of white unwed mothers in maternity homes came to this decision... acting in effect as breeders for white, adoptive parents, for whom they supplied up to nearly 90 percent of all nonrelative infants by the mid-1960s... Unwed mothers were defined by psychological theory as not-mothers... As long as these females had no control over their reproductive lives, they were subject to the will and the ideology of those who watched over them.”¹⁴

In Conclusion

If the rights of all mothers are not fully protected and enforced, we will soon see a future filled with real Offreds. The futuristic story presented by Atwood in her book will virtually come to life. Reproductively exploited Handmaidens will become a true reality in this country and the rest of the world. Money buys *power*; money buys whatever someone wants and that includes children.

Revealingly, *TALK* magazine’s 1999-2000 cover story read “How Much for a White Baby?” Author Jim DeFede claimed that some blonde, blue eyed baby girls go for as much as \$250,000.¹⁵

Is this the United States we want? Is this the kind of world we want to live in?

All mothers, especially single mothers, *must* be protected against exploitation of all kinds, and all children must be protected from becoming commodities - from humans being trafficked.

A word of warning about current adoption practices was issued by the United Nations in 2003, after a careful review of reports from unmarried mothers whose children were taken by adoption. The Report by the Special Rapporteur stated that, “[M]any complaints relating to allegedly fraudulent adoption practices... such cases fall within the ‘sale’ element of his mandate... Regrettably, in many

¹⁴ Solinger, R. (1992). *Wake Up Little Susie, Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (p. 95). New York, NY: Routledge.

¹⁵ DeFede, J. (1999-2000). *How Much for a White Baby?* (pp. 115-116). *TALK*, December-January.

cases, the emphasis has changed from the desire to provide a needy child with a home, *to that of providing a needy parent with a child*. As a result, a whole industry has grown, generating millions of dollars of revenues each year, *seeking babies for adoption...* the Special Rapporteur was alarmed to hear of certain practices... including *the use of fraud and coercion to persuade single mothers to give up their children.*¹⁶ (Emphasis added)

¹⁶ Report of the Rapporteur, Distr. General 6, United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, 59th Session, Item 13, p. 25, A, Adoption 110. (2003). Retrieved December 9, 2015, from [http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/e6802d4a3d1ddbefc1256610002ee274/217511d4440fc9d6c1256cda003c3a00/\\$FILE/G0310090.doc](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/e6802d4a3d1ddbefc1256610002ee274/217511d4440fc9d6c1256cda003c3a00/$FILE/G0310090.doc)