Family Placements for Single Pregnant Women

Margaret Lee *and* Stephanie Walsh

The purpose of this article is the pay tribute to the women and men, who in the early 1970s initiated a service for single pregnant women – a service that would give the women some measure of choice, as they sought secrecy and anonymity. These women needed such a service due to the stigma that was then attached to giving birth to a baby, giving life, outside of marriage. Up until this time, the only option was to go to a mother and baby home, an institution, which society viewed as a place where such women could be 'put away'. A handful of religious men and women developed the idea of family placements, a system whereby the single pregnant woman could live in with a host family, and act in a semi au-pair role, in return for accommodation for the duration of the pregnancy. This arrangement was viewed as being more ordinary, less strange, less traumatic than going into an institution. This is not to say that the mother and baby home experience was inherently harrowing, but it did not suit everyone and the family placement was an alternative.

It is difficult for people in the present age to understand the attitudes of the 1970s. There was no financial assistance for the women who became pregnant outside of marriage. They were dependent on the goodwill of a GP who might conjure up an illness that would entitle the woman to 'sick payments' or on the flexibility of the Community Welfare Officer. Since these office holders usually lived locally, it was extremely difficult to approach them lest the 'secret' became known. Moving to a distant

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Mother and Baby home or family placement made such approaches easier. If the pregnant woman had money from family or savings, it made life more manageable.

Providing such a placement had implications for the host family. This meant maintaining a certain boundary with the pregnant woman, being careful not to become over attached, over intrusive, recognizing the woman's right to privacy, while also giving her a home away from home. It was an arrangement whereby accommodation and privacy were offered for the duration of the pregnancy.

Hosting the single pregnant woman demanded clear lines of communication. One host spoke of the necessity of outlining expectations. She informed the pregnant girl of acceptable times of rising, the help that was needed in the home, and also gave information on opportunities for further learning, *e.g.*, acquiring a new skill such as touch typing.

The placement could be interpreted by some as availing of cheap labour but the relationships that developed between the host families and the pregnant woman would indicate that any exploitation was very rare. No money changed hands. Mostly the arrangement worked out well as it afforded a refuge to the pregnant girl, who could talk about her own problems in confidence. It helped the host woman as, back in the 70s and 80s most woman were alone with their children while the man of the house was out working. Many women felt isolated; so it helped to have another adult to chat to as well as having babysitter if they needed to go out. The friendships that developed provided the pregnant girl with opportunities for conversations concerning the future decisions that had to be made. The host fulfilled the role of an impartial adult, someone outside the girl's immediate network, someone who could discuss available supports and take account of the girl's financial situation In It was possible for her to discuss future plans for both herself and her expected child with someone who was neutral, someone who could put the best interest of herself and the child into perspective, without having any conflict of interest. The host was someone who did not have any vested interest in pushing a certain point of view.

Becoming pregnant while not married was the only thing that singled out the women who used the Family Placement service from their peers. Society did not see it this way. One host recounted that a neighbour disapproved of her decision to provide the service, saying that 'it was not a good

idea to allow that sort of girl' into her home. The prevailing attitude was that when a single girl became pregnant the 'blame' was to be apportioned to the woman. Both the social work service and the providers of the family placement service often saw things differently. They remember many of these pregnant women as being 'too trusting'. They believed the man when he said, 'I will make sure that you won't get pregnant'. Some of the women fell for the line, 'If you get pregnant, I will marry you', only to find themselves abandoned when they missed a few menstrual periods.

It is interesting to note the outcome for the women who availed of the family placement service, particularly as they re-entered the social scene. It was not unusual for a woman to relate that she met the father of her child in the pub and that 'he just nodded in her direction'.

Adoption

Many of the women decided to have the child adopted. This is often portrayed as something that was imposed on the woman, by the Church, by social workers, by family. It is a difficult area to explore. Certain things are clear: the women consented to the adoption, freely consented. The baby was usually fostered and many social workers were careful not to approach the woman to sign the initial consent form until four to six weeks had elapsed. The baby could then be placed with adoptive parents but the woman was informed that she had a six-month period to consider her decision so that she could retract her consent at any time during that period.

These are the facts, but it leaves open the question as to how 'free' was the 'free consent'. Many of the women did not see themselves as having a choice. There were financial constraints, given the level of what was then called the 'unmarried mothers allowance'. Nowadays, it is hard for us to relate to the title of such a social welfare payment. There was the question of accommodation. Many women could not bring the child back to their own homes due to the secrecy issue. Some women never told any member of their own family that they had given birth. They made up excuses for their disappearance from a locality such as an extended foreign trip. It was particularly hard for women who were in professional jobs such as teaching. How did one take leave of absence in this era? Family dynamics often meant that while the woman's mother would be aware of the preg-

nancy, her father was left in the dark. This could be linked to the values of the age and the different roles within the family. The father was seen as the bread winner and the mother was tasked with the upbringing of the children. A pregnant daughter who was not married could be seen as a failure on the part of the mother. In such cases, the mother colluded with the daughter in planning the various alibies.

The attitudes of the family also militated against the pregnant woman from keeping her child. Families were usually devasted by the news of such a pregnancy. On hearing the news that her daughter was pregnant, one very upset mother blurted out that she would prefer to be told that the said daughter has cancer. This was in an age when the diagnosis of cancer most often meant imminent death.

Despite the narrative of 'forced adoptions' there is evidence that some women made a clear decision in favour of adoption. One host recalls a social worker actively advising a woman to keep her baby due to the fact that her relationship with the baby's father showed strong possibilities of stability and permanence. She stressed that the decision to place the baby for adoption was worrying 'when the parents have such a good relationship'. In this particular situation, the social worker's final comment was 'you can be talking forever to a girl, but if she has her mind made up'.

It is difficult to assess the outcome for the women who availed of the family placement service. How they fared externally cannot be taken as an indicator of their internal world. In the immediate aftermath of the birth of the baby, many expressed a sense of relief. Words like ^Thanks God it is over' or 'I still don't believe I am over it' were used. This may refer to the physical act of giving birth. It could also refer to the agonizing months during which they had to hide themselves away. Some married the father of the baby. Some married and did not have any more children which could have accentuated a sense of the loss for the baby that had not been kept.

Of its time

The family placement service declined in the late 1980s. Society changed. The establishment of agencies such as Cherish, One Family, and others supported women who had an unplanned single pregnancy to keep and raise the baby. As some women bravely spoke publicly of their experience of being single and pregnant, it became less of a 'scandal' to give birth

outside of marriage. The institution of marriage itself became more fragile, more uncertain. Women felt freer to travel outside of the country for an abortion. In a society where contraception was becoming available, where sexual *mores* were loosening, there was less need to continue with the pregnancy or to keep it secret. The family placement service was of its time. Over all, it acted as a bridge between the time when the single pregnant woman was 'put away', sent to England or forced into a marriage and the time when pregnancy outside of marriage was no longer viewed as a social problem. It was no longer a source of ostracization or derision.

This article is based on correspondence kept for over 50 years, recently rediscoverd. There were letters from over 15 different women from different backgrounds, addressed to the host family after they had left. Also in this trove of letters are some from four different social service areas all run by religious, showing how much they were involved in each case. They advocated for the best outcome for the pregnant woman and her child in the context of those times.

The mother and baby homes were a product of their time and were seen as a solution of the perceived need for absolute secrecy. Whatever their merits or demerits, we should celebrate the people, mostly religious men and women who pioneered the family place service. They were open-minded and caring, courageous enough to go against the grain of existing society, a society that was mostly fault finding.

Alive in a new way – Holiness is being alive in God. A cousin of Charles de Foucauld, who was much given to the pleasures of eating and drinking, describes a visit from Charles who returned to Paris for a short visit after years of living in the Sahara: 'He entered the room and peace entered with him. The glow of his eyes and especially that very humble smile had taken over his whole person....There was an incredible joy emanating from him.... I, upon seeing that my whole sum of satisfactions did not weigh more than a tiny fraction in comparison with the complete happiness of the ascetic, found rising within me a strange feeling not of envy but of respect.'

It was said of St Teresa of Avila that 'she was rapturously conscious of a life beyond self.' Or think of Carlo Acutis, a handsome Italian teenager who played video games. Millennials can see here one of their own generation who is truly alive. So the challenge for us is to help each other to breathe deeply the rejuvenating Holy Spirit!

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