

Three churches so far have launched an internal investigation of their historic maternity home practices, following hard on the heels of an in-depth investigation by the National Post on coerced adoptions of unwed mothers' babies.

The Post series featured some quite heart-rending narratives by middle-aged women who are still mourning the loss of their babies, taken from them when they were at their most vulnerable and unable to mount a vigorous protest. It seems clear that from the institutions' point of view, the adopting-out of their "clients'" babies was their default mandate, and that whatever method was necessary - duplicity, shaming or stonewalling - could be applied without guilt in the interest of the institution's mission. Everyone was complicit in these schemes: doctors, social workers and maternity-ward caregivers.

The gripping series was thoroughly investigated, informative and thought-provoking. The one thing lacking in the deeply affecting women's narratives, though, is historical context. Although the righteous anger at the churches expressed by many readers is a logical reaction to the bald facts of the stories, such anger is based in a revisionist sense of justice.

I was a teenager in the 1950s. There was no shame that could befall a middleclass teenage girl more horrifying than pregnancy, the evidence in the flesh of a girl's fall from social and moral grace. High schools then did not resemble what one sees on the TV series *Glee*. There was no compassion or understanding offered to pregnant girls by anyone: not by the teachers, the administration, their fellow students or even by their own families. Indeed, their parents felt shamed by their daughter's predicament in their own adult social and cultural circles.

Some teenage couples dropped out of school and married at a ridiculously early age. The boy became a man overnight, working in a gas station or a factory. In such cases both their lives were drastically changed, mostly for the worse.

Typically though, the boy faded into the woodwork and the girl was left to shoulder the burden alone. Those few who defied the conventions of the day had first to quit school, then to bear the child in an atmosphere not of joy, but of disapproval and sadness; then - unless she was extraordinarily lucky in having the support of extraordinarily sympathetic parents - she had to fend for herself and the child. There was no sympathetic, nonjudgmental social system to support and protect her, no funded daycare, no educational accommodations.

Her child would be stigmatized as a bastard. His relations with his extended family would be different from those of his conventionally birthed cousins. In a society where fatherless families were rare, his mother-only situation would make him an object of pity or contempt. (It would be different if his father were dead. Then he would be accepted and well supported.) The mother's former girlfriends would abandon her, as they trooped off to their secretarial or nursing or teaching jobs and began husband-hunting in earnest.

Abortion at the time was illegal and scandalous. So let's be clear about why those young women were in those church-run, unwed mothers' homes. The girls were there because it was too shaming for them to be seen in public. The churches - who did so much to create and maintain the taboo against premarital sex - established those homes for the sake of the babies. They didn't want them being brought up by unwed mothers. Adoptive families wanted babies, and the churches wanted the babies to have real families. Any girl entering such a home would have to be awfully naïve to believe the institution had no agenda in providing them such elaborate services at little or no cost. And surely, once there, it was clear that nobody was going home with her own baby.

I don't mean to add to the anguish of the mothers who gave up their babies (even though I will naturally be accused of

doing exactly that), but they are revisiting their experiences through the social and cultural lens of 2012 rather than 1955. A mother who insisted on keeping her child in 1955 wasn't doing herself or her child any favours. I am not absolving the institutions of a certain brutality in their mission-driven processes. But they thought they were doing the right thing for both the mothers, in returning them to a life unburdened by a ruinous responsibility, and for the children, who would grow up in the domestic environment offering the greatest promise of a happy and successful future.

From the cultural perspective of their era, the churches were not wrong. Ironically enough, given what we know statistically of the social outcomes for children of single mothers today, when measured against children in two parent families, they were not wrong, period.