

The phenomenon of infant abandonment in Europe and in United States of America and the way to deal with it

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SUMMARY

From Oidipodas' time, whose parents abandoned him in Kithairona Mountain so that Pythia's oracle would not be true, up to the Moses myth, whose Israeli mother placed him on a papyrus on the Niles' edges so that the Pharaoh's of Egypt daughter could find him, history has shown that the phenomenon of infant abandonment has been a repeating reality. The practice of infant abandonment right after their birth is a phenomenon involving a variety of motives depending on several socio-economic factors. Nevertheless, in the recent years there has been a rising interest in illustrating the reasons for the persistence of this phenomenon in contemporary society, despite changes in its structure and norms.

Aim: The aim of the present study is to investigate the infant abandonment phenomenon, the factors leading a mother to abandon her infant, as well as the available ways to deal with this issue, within European countries and United States of America.

Methods: The study methods included the evaluation of published retrospective and research studies on infant abandonment, causes of this phenomenon, factors leading to abandonment and possible solutions within European countries and United States of America. We also included a literature review in MEDLINE and CINAHL databases (1990-2009).

Results: Infant abandonment is a complicated issue involving parental and children rights. It involves the fundamental children's right to live with their families and know their roots of origin. Mothers abandoning their children are under great psychological distress, they possibly suffer from mental disorders or they are often victimized both in their personal and social life. In the fight against infant abandonment, it is essential to secure a woman's right to freely choose the time to become a mother and to provide all the social and financial support needed for a new mother and her child.

Key words: abandoned infants, infant abandonment in Europe and the United States of America.

INTRODUCTION

Data in international literature regarding newborns abandonment by their mothers are scarce, as research on this subject is limited. Research shows that there will always be desperate mothers who feel that there are important reasons to abandon their children soon after birth (Cesario 2003 & Oberman 2008). Studies also show that these women belong to different social classes or they live in a state of social isolation. They may also be living in family with a different structure comparing to the standard conventional family.

Factors such as unemployment, poverty, women abuse of any kind (financial or sexual), incest, parental alcoholism, drug abuse, HIV infection, etc (Mousourou 2005) seem to be responsible for these situations. Other researches indicate that women capable of abandoning their children are even capable to commit child murder (Oberman 1996). Some women experience more fear in losing their mate rather than their child. As a result, they take desperate measures to save their affair without knowing that they bear a child; when suddenly the baby arrives, they get into panic and simply wish to "get rid of it" (Williams-Mbengue 2001 & Oberman 1996). Reasons for negative acts behaviors towards the infant may include negative childhood experiences, emotionally poor parental relationships, unfulfilled interpersonal relationship with the child's father, negative or adverse environmental and financial situations, poor living conditions, etc (Riga and at, 1990).

Infant abandonment in Europe

In Western Europe most cases of infant abandonment involve very young women deprived of some kind of freedom (illegal immigrants, prostitutes, socially isolated groups). Nongovernmental organizations indicate that mothers in risk have no knowledge of their rights or have no access to social or health services. As a consequence, they become vulnerable to exploitation and they abandon their children without having a choice (Doctors of the World, 2007). Both in Europe and in the rest of the world, there is much controversy about the re-introduction of the so-called baby drop box system, used in Europe during Medieval times. In the 12th century, Pope Innocentios the 3rd urged women to leave children that were not able to raise on the stairs of a church. At a monastery in Florence during the 14th century there was a specially adjusted wooden rolling barrel (la ruota) where unwanted newborns were left. Throughout Europe, till the 19th century and in Greece till 60's, in nurseries where unwanted infants were abandoned there were special admissions in use (Pediatric Society Minute Archives, 2006).

In many countries, child abandonment in public place is considered as a crime and the measure of baby drop box is considered by many as a crime motivation whilst mothers carry the overall responsibility. Those measures

often have no legal basis, as it happens in Belgium. Recently, in Germany, permission was granted for a campaign, while in Italy, an unwanted pregnancy is still considered as a sin and a social stigmatization (Williams – Mbengue, 2001). Experts suggest that the establishment of a baby drop box system is expected to reduce abortions, child murders, child abuse and infant abandonment in public place (Boyes R., 2007). The first electronic baby drop boxes were introduced in Germany in 2000 (presently, there exist in many countries all over the world). The places where baby drop boxes are usually placed are out of public view with no surveillance cameras placed around. The infant is put in a reception surface – through a "window" in a specially adjusted area of the wall of a building– which gradually gets lower leading the infant in a heated small bed. A special alarm notifies health professionals for an infant arrival, and the child's birth is officially recorded in birth registries. Usually, there is enough time for the mother to leave the area without being noticed, and in case she changes her mind, she is provided with a three months time to request her child back (Poggioli, 2007).

Dealing with the phenomenon in Europe and in United States of America

In 2007, the European Council, in order to collect opinions and deduct some conclusions, conducted a research regarding ways of dealing with the infant abandonment phenomenon, in twenty countries of the European Union. Among results of this research, it was found that in some of the countries, national statistical data on the percentages of abandoned infants are rarely collected or they do not exist at all. With the assumption that the situation in Ukraine (1549 cases of baby abandonment in 2004, but only 998 in 2006) might be useful as an example for a thorough analysis, the introduction of an electronic database was decided, aiming to exchange conclusions between the affiliated countries (Hancock M., 2007).

France has established a privacy system for the mother who abandons an infant and this country, as well as United States of America, is the only where this system is used. Five hundred cases of unknown births are recorded yearly in France, in comparison to 10.000 a year in 60's, when contraception and abortions were still illegal. Law allows a mother to give birth to a baby reserving full anonymity not recording her identity to any official data (<http://assembly.coe.int>, 2008). In Germany, in 2003, the annual recorded number of abandoned newborns was more than 70, and within the first trimester of 2007, at least 23 infants were recorded as murdered. Experts have expressed their concern that the actual number is much higher. A relevant campaign was started to illuminate the importance and length of the problem and to promote wider use of the baby drop box (Poggioli, 2007).

In Italy, more than 30 children were abandoned during the last two years, especially in the rundown neighborhoods of Rome, due to the rise of the immigrants' population. Multilingual campaign posters were used calling them not to abandon newborns and at the same time, public education campaigns were undertaken regarding the right to have access to health and social services. Additionally, a high tech baby drop box was placed in a central hospital of Rome (Boyes R., 2007).

In United Kingdom, programs of foster parenting for the abandoned children are promoted, along with the implementation of strict rules for the procedure of foster families' choice, in order to avoid baby jamming in the institutions. The aforementioned practice is known in this country since 19th century and it was supported by a volunteer spirit of wealthy families.

In Central and in East Europe, there is still in place a strong tendency of parents to leave their children's care in institutions. This practice is in use especially in Romania, a country which is still influenced by the heritage of its old political status involving measures by the state in order to take care of abandoned children. In Ukraine, the suggested reasons for this phenomenon include the parental family pressure on teenage mothers, the limited financial sources, the case where the mother herself has been a victim of abandonment and a number of other problems related to drug and alcohol addiction (Hancock M., 2007).

In many counties, legislation requires investigating for the family of the abandoned child. In general, due to differences in legislation and family practices at each country, a consensus for dealing with this phenomenon is difficult to reach (Hancock M., 2007).

United States of America voted a new legislation in 1999, which was implemented in pilot manner in Texas. According to this, parents can anonymously leave their baby to safe places (hospitals, police departments, fire stations) without the risk of being prosecuted. During hospitalization, care of the baby is assigned to a member of the personnel (Rosner, 1997 & Cesario, 2003). Written guidelines based on a certain protocol are provided to the personnel of these services, which include the steps they need to take from the moment they find an abandoned infant (Buckley, 2007). In many circumstances, a letter is sent to the mother of the infant – when her identity is known- giving her information for available services where she could ask for support for her and her baby in case she changes her mind (Williams – Mbengue, 2001). By this way, the risk of abandoning a child in an unsafe area where its life could be in danger is reduced. This also protects the parents who feel that they have no other choice than abandoning their child and offers them a chance to leave their newborn in a safe place (Drescher – Burke, 2004). The people in charge claim that this legislation is a positive step but it should be part of a wider effort to the improvement of health

services and related social services (Cesario, 2001 & Buckley, 2007).

In Greece, from the very first years of the constitution of the Hellenic State, care was provided for the orphans and the abandoned children, in the capital of the country. In 1883, the first baby drop box was established at the Community Nursery of Athens and remained in use until 1960 (Korasidou, 1992). In Greece, as in the other countries, there was much controversy regarding its purposes, since many believed that its use would encourage birth of children outside marriage and abandonment as a consequence (Pediatric Society Minute Archives, 2006). In the present, there are only isolated cases of infant abandonment, since family bonds are still very strong. Infants found in pavements or trash bins were transferred to a public hospital by the police, where they were hospitalized and as soon as a vacancy existed in the Centre of Child Care, they are transferred. At the same time, an investigation starts with the aim of identifying the mother. Data from the Registry of Underage Care show that the percentage of Greek and Immigrant women abandoning their children is similar. In 2005, 13 abandoned children were found, 9 in 2006, 10 in 2007 and 5 in the first semester of 2008 (Eleutherotypia Newspaper – 05/07/2008). Today there are thirteen Centers of Child Care in Greece, with a total capacity for 600-700 children, along with six Child City Centers where another 200-250 children are hosted. These centers aim to offer medical treatment, education and professional training to the children that are unprotected and deprived of family care.

CONCLUSIONS

Child abandonment after birth is a complicated issue which is related to both the parental and the child rights. Nevertheless, in Europe and especially in Central and Eastern Europe, financial and social factors including poverty, social class and adolescent motherhood deprived of financial support from the parental families are responsible (Bloch, 1998). In Greece, a survey regarding the views of Greek nurses for the phenomenon of child abandonment indicated that the great majority believe that adolescent mothers belong to low socio-economic class, they do not have financial sources and that they are more prone to abandon their infants (83.5%, 70,9% and 73,8%, respectively) (Athanasopoulou, 2008). Health policies, effective social and health services, accessibility to those services and in particular, accessibility for socially isolated groups play an important role in a woman's decision, especially when she confronts an unwanted pregnancy and she has limited choices for dealing with the situation (Rosner, 1997 & Green, 1999). Pregnancy is unwanted in most such cases, whereas information on contraception issues is inadequate. These women have a fear for the health services or they don't know how to effectively use them, before or during their pregnancy

(Cesario, 2003 & Oberman, 2008). Psychological changes and stressors, as well, are causes for abandoning an infant in public places (Bonnet, 1993 & Oberman, 1996). Studies from international literature verify that those women are importantly under significant stress, they suffer from mental disorders and they are often victimized, in personal and in social level, as well (Cesario, 2003). Newborn abandonment raises the issue of accessibility to special information services for young people and mostly for women's sexual rights and reproductive health. Abortion has not yet been legal to most of the countries. Even when it is allowed, it is usually subjected to many bureaucratic procedures that inhibit many women. In some of the cases and in some of the countries there are strict time limits for the procedure of an abortion, so that in everyday practice, the right of abortion is of no value (Athanasopoulou & Kouta, 2009). Beyond of a doubt, there is a need for family planning which would take into account the demographic pressures created by the birth of a child as well as the need of young mothers to be followed up and supported. All suggested measures should focus on the fundamental principle of respect for the children's rights and most importantly, for the utmost human right of a child to live with its family and to know its origin. Special attention should be provided to socially vulnerable women coming from minorities. Another important issue is the de-institutionalization of the abandoned infants. Another necessity is that these children are provided with alternatives so that they are able to obtain a family through adoption (Rosner D. et al, 1997). A mother's failure to take care of her child is expressed through abandoning of the child to a midwifery or elsewhere. In Greece, cases like these are inconsistently treated. On one hand, the state is having difficulty in breaking the privacy of a family and on the other hand, it is obliged to force the constitutional law for protection of children and youth. As a result, whenever there is a case of child abandonment or child abuse, in the face of these difficulties, the state intervenes and only temporarily offers to the child the choice of a foster family or an institution (Mousourou, 2005). The responsibility of effective care under the broader issue of child protection from its parents is expressed in a close emotional bond. A mother's failure to respond to this need could be a result of personal irresponsibility and deficiency. A similar failure could also be attributed to adverse socio-economic conditions combined with the crisis that the institution of family is facing in our days.

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