

PROBLEMATIC MOTHERHOOD: CHILD ABANDONMENT, ABORTION, ADOPTION AND SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN RUSSIA IN THE 1990S

Olga Issoupova

Motherhood is and always was problematic. A child is a challenge for a woman even if it is born in favourable conditions and the mother is healthy. It necessarily represents a significant change in life style, new responsibilities, new emotions, usually a new social role and status. In addition, many women fear giving birth, and pregnancy as such is not unambiguously pleasant. As for the really pleasant sides of the situation, they are often not really clear and visible until a child is born, or even until some time has passed after the birth. Childbearing, as Ann Oakley states, is a trial for the woman's strength, which can give her a lot in terms of self-fulfilment if she 'passes' the 'exam' successfully. However, more often than not, the institutional sides of motherhood and childbearing interfere with the experience, making it at least contradictory, and at worst self-defeating. In this article I want to discuss one of the worst situations which a woman can get into in the area of motherhood—that of child abandonment, or relinquishment of a baby at birth to the State—which is a particular legal form of abandonment in the case of Russia.

In 1995–97, doing qualitative research for my PhD on the topic of attitudes of Russian women to motherhood, I came across this special issue, and it turned out that I did more interviews with relinquishing mothers than with any other category of women. This problem began to interest me very much, because in the Russian context it may be the least acceptable behaviour in relationship to motherhood—people would suppose that if you do not want a child, then you try not to get pregnant, and if you do, you have an abortion. Relinquishing mothers are blamed most of all by other women, whether or not they are mothers them-

selves. So, for me it was kind of a puzzle—why do they actually do so in such an unfavourable context?

The problem of social orphanhood is one of the most serious problems in contemporary Russia. The number of abandoned children, who are deprived of their parents' care and guardianship, does not fall from year to year, but is on the rise instead. Abandonment has the most negative consequences when newborn babies are given up by their mothers, since the health of the former can be seriously affected. According to the statistics presented in the article on child relinquishment by Brutman, Varga, and Rodionova (1994: 151), in Moscow the number of children who are abandoned by their parents and accepted into children's homes increased 2.1 times during the years 1988–94. Meanwhile overall fertility rates dropped and became 1.5 times less. About half of the children taken under State guardianship (from 35% to 50%) are babies relinquished by their mothers and abandoned children found in public places. Between one and three cases of relinquishment occurred in Moscow maternity hospitals every day during 1991. In 1992, in one Moscow maternity hospital (which, in contrast to other Moscow maternity hospitals, routinely accepts the least wealthy patients who lack any documents), 113 newborn babies were relinquished by their mothers. In 1993, the number of relinquished children in this maternity hospital rose to 156, and in 1994 to 214.

According to the archives of Moscow maternity hospitals, the unwanted pregnancies are, in addition, very often accompanied by pathologies and preterm births: more than 35% of these pregnancies are not carried to term, in comparison with only 4% in the general population. More than 45% even of those relinquished babies who were carried to term are born with symptoms of physical prematurity, and need intensive care immediately after birth. In comparison, in the general population, not more than 10% of newborn babies are in this condition. A survey of 62 mothers relinquishing their newborn babies, carried out by psychologists (Brutman, Varga, Rodionova 1996: 151) in the years 1993–94 in this maternity hospital, has shown that most of them are young women 15 to 19 years old (60%). As a rule, they are unmarried, and many live with their own parents, brothers and sisters. Therefore their parents' opinion concerning a newborn child's fate is often decisive. A significant minority of relinquishing mothers are older women, including 15% who are over 30 years old.

When relinquishing mothers are asked about the reasons for such a

decision, most often they explain this by reference to the unfavourable economic situation (50%), to their being too young and immature themselves and therefore not prepared for the parental role (20%), and to desertion by the child's father (20%). The negative attitude of the mother's own parents (25%) and friends (10%) to their becoming parents at such a young age plays some role too. Fifteen percent of these women simply stated that 'a child will prevent me from living in the way in which I want to live'.

I will now try to present my own findings, based on seventeen interviews. Thirteen of these are with birth mothers who intended to abandon their babies (two of them finally took the babies home, one or possibly two decided in favour of so called temporary refusals, a term I will explain below, and the remaining nine conclusively left their children at the maternity hospital, although a further two of them said they might have preferred temporary refusal if they had been given such a possibility). The remaining four interviews serve the purpose of comparison and context. Three of them are with single mothers keeping their babies, and one is with an adoptive mother.

Before proceeding with the actual description of cases, I want to explain here the meaning of the main legal and social terms relating to the topic of child abandonment in contemporary Russia, the terms which I will then use throughout the text. First, I shall explain the legal situation concerning relinquishment of babies as such. In Russia every woman has a right to relinquish parental rights over her newborn child while she is in the maternity hospital. In this case she signs a special document which is called 'parental refusal'. Then she will not have any information about this child's future life. The children go into children's homes, where they can live until adulthood, or they are adopted. The situation in the children's homes is bad (see Waters 1992), but adoption has been made easier now. Still, abandoning parents (usually only mothers) are blamed for their children's fate more than anyone else. There is also an option of temporary refusal, allowing a mother to leave a child in a children's home for a limited time, and then take it home when her situation changes. There are two possibilities: to do it for a year, or to do it for three years. This involves and requires permanent and regular contact between the mother and child; she can and should visit him or her at the children's home ideally every day. However, this option, as distinct from full refusal, is open only to women who have residence registration at the place where the birth takes place (in the

case of my study, in Moscow). If they have registration in another place, they theoretically can take the child to that city and leave it at a children's home there under the same conditions. However, this is too complicated practically and psychologically. Consequently, in reality temporary refusals are open only to women with Moscow residence registration.

Description of cases

Relinquishing mothers

Raia, born in 1962, a street saleswoman, has one 13-year-old daughter, and has now relinquished a premature son by another man. She was living with him, and they agreed to have a child; however, for Raia the main reason for doing this, as she herself admits, was as follows: 'to keep him, yes...I did think of doing that. I had a child so that he would not leave... I thought that if I have a child, he will stay with me'. However, he deserted her in the fourth month of pregnancy for unexplained reasons. She then thought of giving birth at home and killing the child, but was frightened herself by the fact that such an idea could come into her head, and decided to give birth to him and to leave him to the State's guardianship: "I will not go anywhere, I will have the child at home", I thought, "I will deliver at home, and—but where, I think—well, I will suffocate him" ...and then I think—"God, what am I thinking..." ' She then decided, 'do not complicate things, have the baby, leave it at the hospital, and that is all, there, someone who needs to have a baby will adopt him, or something'. She concluded that this was better: 'let the baby live'. Raia thinks that early abortion is much better than this, but does not accept late abortion, after three months, since she thinks it is bad for a woman's health. She said that if he, the father, does not want the child, then she does not want it either, and that she got pregnant in order to strengthen her relationship with the man. But it does not mean that she does not want children at all: 'I always wanted the first one, the first one is the first one'. She also strongly preferred daughters to sons. Now, she had given birth to a son. On the other hand, she asserted that if she had the possibility of economic survival on her own with her children without becoming destitute, she would never have abandoned him: 'But the reason is purely economic'.

Ksenia, born in 1976, a student, is the only relinquishing mother of my sample who is both married and financially secure. Although she

asserted that she wanted children, and even two of them, in her plans this should have come much later, she did not even know when. Now she needs and wants to study, then she would like to undertake post-graduate studies, so children could happen only then. It is purely a case of the 'wrong time': 'I do not want a child, and especially now'. She actually said that she might have agreed to have a child, which meant for her to take the child home, if it had happened earlier, when she was younger and 'did not understand anything'. She wanted to have an abortion from the moment she learned of her pregnancy, in spite of her husband's insistence that she should have the child. But she recognized her pregnancy too late due to a hormonal disorder. Late abortion did not frighten her. She did not want this baby to exist, she actually tried 'to do something' until the last moment. Even at the moment of actual birth: 'No, I did not think that I would have to do this... To give birth and then to relinquish'.

I asked: 'And then, what? What did you think should happen?'

Ksenia: 'But, then...well, that the child would die, or, I do not know what'. She actually had a private agreement with the hospital staff, that they would 'help' her—and she thought it would be a late abortion, as she was uncertain about the time of conception, but in fact a normal birth took place, and the child was not even premature. This was not easy for her to accept. Psychologically, she did not have a baby, as she did not want it and did something about it; so, what happened still seemed like a late abortion to her.

Alisa, born in 1978, is a student, and lives with her mother and her unregistered partner, both of whom work and pay for her education. She gave birth to a very premature baby with little chance of survival, and in a relatively light-hearted way she abandoned him. She was not ready for motherhood at the time, she felt that she first had to develop further herself. Her relationships with both her mother and her partner were not good, she thought they demanded too much from her, and she was not ready for responsibility. When she got pregnant, their reaction was rather indifferent and accusatory: 'Well, how could you get into this!' They did not push her either toward abortion or to giving birth, thinking it was purely her own private business. She said if they had been more interested in this future child, she could have become more interested too. However, she admitted that she might have been subconsciously intentionally careless in pregnancy, and this is why the baby was born so premature. She would not want to continue to live with this

man, as he was 'too demanding, and he thinks only about himself'.

Nastia, born in 1976, relinquished her third child, all three being from one and the same man, who was her long-term common-law husband and who has now left her for another, childless, woman. Nastia actually tried the third pregnancy to pull him back, but although he was willing to sleep with her again, he was not glad about the third child, nor had he been about the first two. So now she has to work (as a street salesperson, or a cleaner, whatever she finds) to support the children and herself, and she has no one to help her with child care. She is not a Muscovite. She is very bitter about the situation, she blames him, herself, and the other woman, but her life position is passive—she thinks that all this was meant to happen, it was her destiny. 'I visited a fortune-teller, and she said to me: you will have two children, and you will lose the third one. So, it happened exactly as she told me.' She thinks no one will marry her even with two children, but does not intend to separate from them, and believes that her future will be full of hard, dirty, badly-paid jobs which no one else wants.

Dasha, born in 1978, relinquished her second child. She lives in one room in a communal flat with her parents, who are janitors, and with her brother and sister. They all drink and fight with each other. Her first daughter, now three years old, who lives there too, was born after Dasha's attempt, at her mother's insistence, to have a late abortion. The child was born alive, however. This caused a crisis for Dasha who then left home and did not return for several months. After her daughter's discharge from hospital, her father insisted that Dasha take care of her, and she did. Both pregnancies seemingly resulted from Dasha's overall lack of control over her life. They were from two different young men, probably from one-night-stands. She says that she is not promiscuous 'too often'. She has a boyfriend she hopes to marry some time, but he now has no job prospects and also lives with his parents, but in a separate self-contained flat. For her this would constitute social mobility. He said that he will agree to her moving in with him, but without the children, as he is not the father of either of them, and she actually had them by other men while she was in a relationship with him. Dasha's parents agreed to take care of her older daughter, but said that she should somehow get rid of the second one. However, she did not want to have a late abortion again, and she did not find out about her pregnancy until very late—at the sixth or seventh month—perhaps because she was trying to hide the fact from herself and others for as long as possible. Then

she decided to give birth and to leave the child at the maternity hospital. Her mother agreed, but her father did not—he thought she should be responsible herself for all her children. Dasha's late recognition of both her pregnancies might also have something to do with learning disabilities, as the only symptom of pregnancy for her is that 'the stomach grows!' She is unemployed and does not want to work, preferring to get married and be kept by a man.

Larisa, born in 1960, relinquished her third son. Her two elder sons are 15 and 10 years old. She has a bad relationship with the first one and is frightened of him, while the second one is her friend and helper. Larisa had this last pregnancy in an attempt to keep a man, but he recently returned to his wife. She is currently unemployed (she had been working in a guesthouse near Moscow which has now closed down), but she has a kitchen garden and hopes that the guesthouse will open again soon. She does not want to disturb her second son by having another baby in the home, and is afraid of the first son's reaction. She said that relinquishment is, in principle, better than abortion, because: 'like this, at least he is alive!' She also hoped that her third son would be adopted soon as a 'young baby, and from a healthy mother!'

Zina, born in 1969, has no control over her life, and very low self-esteem in terms both of her appearance and abilities. She lives with her mother, who always swears at her, and her nine-year-old daughter from a husband who left Zina for another woman. Zina is currently unemployed, a 'drinking person', as she said herself, and her income consists of what her occasional lovers 'bring round'. Her mother receives a pension. Zina said that if she brought a second daughter home, this time not even knowing who the father is, 'mother will kill me'. In addition, it would harm Zina's elder daughter, in her opinion, as there would be less money for her, it would be necessary to divide it between two children. In addition, the first daughter is, in Zina's view, 'beautiful, not like me', while the second one is 'similar to me', so Zina suspects she would repeat her own unfortunate life anyway.

Liuba, born in 1976, was adopted herself by her aunt. The adoption was kept secret until it was revealed during a family quarrel when Liuba was eleven years old. This was traumatic. She became difficult and uncontrollable and has bad relationships with all her relatives now. Liuba is from a provincial city and unemployed, and lives at her adoptive parents' expense. She lived with her boyfriend for a long time, but was driven from his house by her mother-in-law, who said she had a bad

character and was no good for her son, at the sixth month of pregnancy. In addition, he was persuaded by his mother that the child was not his. Liuba still loves him and tried to meet with him and restore the relationship, but without success. She thinks she might be subfertile as she was sexually active for two years prior to this pregnancy without using contraception, and this pregnancy was the first. Therefore, and because it is a child from a man she loves, and because she would be happy to have a child, she does not want to relinquish it. However, she is afraid to remain alone with the child without housing, income, parenting skills, and no one to help her or at least to teach her these skills. She cannot use the temporary refusal option in Moscow as she is not a Muscovite.

Lidia, born in 1969, lives in an unregistered marriage. Both she and her partner are now unemployed and live at his parents' expense. The parents do not accept her. He has a registered wife, from whom he is still not officially divorced, and a son with her. Lidia also has a son by him, and has now given birth to a daughter. She has plenty of additional problems due to the fact that she has no documents: she lost them due to a criminal affair which she got into when she was trying to sell her flat. Therefore, she cannot even register her children: 'I was lying awake all night, thinking how could I take her home in the future, how? If I do not have any documents now, how could I take her later? I am still unable to register my first child, due to this lack of documents...' Lidia always used to be independent, even while living with this man: she worked as a street flower-seller, while he was unemployed and stayed at home with the child. When she got pregnant for the second time, he said his parents would not accept this and she must have an abortion. But she could not obtain it free of charge as she is not a Muscovite, and had no money to pay for it. Still she feels guilty that she did not have an abortion. Her attitude to relinquishment as such is complicated: 'In principle, I never blame people who do so... Because it is difficult to blame those people [*small laugh*]. Because one can always find oneself in such a situation. But I never imagined that I would really find myself in such a situation. [Now], I have had my share of life's troubles to the full, I think...' She might have preferred a temporary refusal to relinquishment, but cannot obtain it since legally she is not a Muscovite.

Now I will present two cases of temporary refusals. Both mothers who took this option are aged 25–26 years at the time of birth, and in each case this is their first child.

Inna, born in 1970, lives alone, has a bad relationship with her mother and her stepfather, and prefers to be alone. Inna does not want to be attached to anyone, so she does not want to marry her first lover who is the father of her child. She would love a child, but needs more time to accustom herself to the fact that the child exists: 'The pregnancy was too short'. She will probably opt for temporary refusal as she is a Muscovite and this option is open to her. Inna wants to be friends with her mother but hates her stepfather who is mentally ill and abusive and lives at her mother's expense. She does not want to accept help from her lover as she thinks he would then want to live with her, and she would not agree to this. She did not tell any of these people about her pregnancy.

Tamara was born in 1971. She wanted to relinquish her first daughter as she is unmarried and has to finish her studies, the child's father refused to have anything to do with her and she is not a Muscovite. However, she found she could not do it. When she saw her daughter she realised that this was happiness itself: 'I realized I am a mummy now'. As she has insufficient resources she chose the temporary refusal option and was allowed to do so for a year. During this year, she plans to visit the child, finish her studies, work as a street salesperson, and earn enough money to take the child home to a flat she hopes to be renting by that time. Tamara thinks she should rely in all this on herself alone and has not said anything yet to her parents, but plans to tell them. However, she would also feel insecure about her abilities concerning child care if such an option of temporarily delegating the actual child care to others were impossible.

Women who initially wanted to abandon their new-born babies and then changed their minds while they were still at the maternity hospital constitute the category I will consider next. Interestingly, in both cases the interference of their male partners, the fathers of the children in question, was crucial to the situation.

Ella, born in 1964, wanted to leave her second daughter at the maternity hospital, because she worried that this daughter would have poor health since Ella herself was 'starving' during pregnancy. She was assured that the baby was healthy, but was not convinced. Ella and her present partner have income problems at the moment, and conflict with their neighbours in the communal flat. But he wanted a child, and they had a good relationship. All this finally persuaded her to take the baby home. Her first husband was stronger, but morally worse, in Ella's view,

so now she was happy to live with a somewhat passive man, but wanted their family to become more well-to-do. Ella's elder daughter from her first husband did not want this baby, however, and Ella did not want to harm her first child. It was another case of the wrong time, in Ella's own words. About her second husband, she said: 'Yes, he has no other children, and so now this child, his only one, will be disadvantaged'.

Nina, born in 1958, is the mother of eight children now, a woman from a village who came to Moscow following an agreement with her elderly landlady that she would inherit her Moscow flat from her on condition that Nina would take care of her in her old age. Nina is a widow. Her first six children are from her common-law husband (it is the custom in their village not to register marriages officially). Four of them stayed in the village with Nina's mother, surviving on market-gardening. Two others were in Moscow with Nina, the youngest one, and the oldest one who acts as baby-sitter. In addition, Nina has now given birth to twins from her new partner, a Tadzhik ten years younger than her, who worked in a factory in Moscow at the time, but was not well-paid. He initially refused to accept the twins as they were daughters and he needed a son. He went to his relatives in Tadzhikistan for a family council concerning this issue. Nina planned to relinquish these two last babies, although she did not want to ('Oh, I even cried, and I even had a high temperature that day!'), but did not want the shame of single motherhood either ('it is shameful, shameful, to be born without a father!'). Now her new partner's relatives decided that he can keep these daughters as he has no other children, and it is better than nothing (his first wife was infertile, and they divorced). Nina is very glad to take her last-born twins home, although she has no nappies and no children's clothes for them. The maternity hospital was going to help her with this. She thinks that economically and physically she can manage any number of children on her own, however. Her partner's agreement is only symbolically important.

Single mothers function as a useful comparison, since taking sole responsibility for their children represents an alternative to relinquishment. The issue of money (in the form of savings or income) and social networks of support are crucial for this choice now, as welfare support is practically non-existent. However, maternal feelings (whether women do or do not feel them towards the new-born child) are important as well. Their own parents' help is also essential. Single mothers tend to have better legal status in comparison to women who relinquish their

babies, the former having Moscow residence registration more often than the latter. Their initial economic position is better, but destitution follows almost inevitably since benefits are not sufficient, even though the mothers in my study worked hard and not in the profession for which they were trained (one, for instance was employed as a cleaner, though she had higher education). The health of single mothers' children is often poor, since it is difficult to support them adequately, and the mothers' own health is often poor (especially if these single mothers are older women). According to Vera, one of my interviewees, women become single mothers due to idealism, or because they want to keep a man. In the latter case a child has an instrumental meaning initially, but it is not only instrumental, because they do accept the child after its birth. Some women lack the desire to form a relationship with a man, or have too high a standard of requirements from candidates. For many single mothers, motherhood serves as the foundation of their identity, in spite of the fact that they are not really single-mothers-by-choice, but rather *post hoc* acceptors. It can also mean a life crisis resolution. Some do really feel desire for a child, and are proper nest builders, according to Lamb's classification.¹

The first single mother in my sample, Valia, was born in 1976, and works as a painter and decorator. She may have learning disabilities too, but she did not relinquish her second daughter although she had her as a single mother again, and this daughter has a heart birth defect. Valia herself had been placed in an orphanage by her grandmother who chose to keep Valia's brother while Valia's mother was in prison and her father refused to have anything to do with the family. Valia grew up in the children's home and then moved in with her grandmother and her brother, who had become an abusive alcoholic. Valia's first boyfriend was her hope, they lived together happily in his flat, but then he went to prison too. She had to leave. Then she lived with friends with her child in a place which is actually a 'den'—people come there to drink vodka, take drugs or have sex with prostitutes. Valia got pregnant by some Azeri worker who then pretended he did not know her. Then she left for her grandmother's home again, and her brother told her that he would kill them both if she brought her 'Azeri bastard' home. But she intends to do so anyway, she will not relinquish her daughter and worries about

the latter's health. Valia said, however, that she will not be 'careless' anymore, she has enough children for now.

Alla, born in 1965, chose to be a single mother. She was infertile, and had IVF treatment in order to have a child from her long-term married lover; she finally succeeded, and has a son. Alla had an abortion from a pregnancy by this same man eight years ago, when she was not ready for single motherhood, and she does not regret this abortion. However, when she decided she was ready, she was very determined to have a baby and became depressed about the possibility of not succeeding. She had no financial problems, despite the cost of IVF: 'There is money for me, my family's money'. Alla has a good parental family, and receives real support from them, such that 'I realized that there is no reason to leave home'. She is reluctant to marry anyone just to have legitimate children; she is very selective in respect of the prospective father: 'I know for sure, absolutely, who I want to be their father!' Alla also is reluctant to adopt: 'let them go to hell, other people's children! Better to have one's own'; 'I want them to be similar to me, in all traits, even bad ones, and, well, similar to the father I chose for them'. Therefore, Alla's attitude towards the relinquishment of children is strongly negative: this is 'useless'; 'it is probably good, in some cases, because some people want to adopt, I do not know, but I cannot imagine myself in either of these two roles'; and this is even worthy of some 'special regulations': 'perhaps it would be cruel to sterilize them, but at the same time, what are all these children for?... They actually bear not only one child each, to be left in the orphanage, but many of them...their *mores* are from another world—nothing of this kind could happen, or ever did happen, among my friends and acquaintances...'

Vera was born in 1960, she is a single mother, and the founder of a single mothers' association. For her, single pregnancy was a crisis resolution: 'I was absolutely fed up with my life then, the life I was living in those years'. She had job stability, a flat of her own, income of her own, and could receive—and does receive—her parents' help. She earns money doing translations and giving Spanish lessons. Still she is poor, and other mothers in the association are even poorer, some working as cleaners although they have higher education. Many of their children are ill. Vera thinks the majority become single mothers in an attempt to get men, but then accept the child. Some bear a child only after the age of 40, 'after all their relatives have died'. These women are in an especially hard situation as they do not even have parents to help them, and their own health is bad, 'they have no energy... Better to do it when you are young', said Vera, then you overcome obstacles more

easily. Some of the association's members managed to adopt children as single women—one case worked out well (the adoption of a girl of two who had been abused in a children's home), another worked out badly, Vera believes because of the 'poor genes' of the child. She says in this respect: 'all this... [relinquishment of babies], how can I say, it is unfortunate, it does not turn out happily, therefore it is always risky to adopt'. In Vera's view, the relinquishment of babies happens when a mother is not 'developed' enough and therefore does not really know which things she should have and do in her life, and which other things are 'not for her': 'So a person with a low level of self-consciousness can sometimes do things which are not necessary for him or her, they are not for him or her'.

The case of an adoptive mother shows what can happen to the relinquished children. This particular working-class mother, Galia, managed to adopt a three-month-old girl only one year after she put in an application to adopt. Galia agreed to the first baby offered to her. Galia was born in 1959, she is infertile, working class, married, and has two rooms in a communal flat. She has had a long history of unsuccessful fertility treatment with harmful side effects, and decided not to continue and not to have IVF because of its dangers, and: 'To throw away money, and what for? For nothing? Better to spend this money on a child who is already here'. Galia's attitude towards relinquishing mothers is complicated, but rather negative and hostile: 'I cannot understand these women. How is it possible to give up one's own child? To carry it inside one's body, feel it, and then to give it up? But how did she explain it—the girl who bore our daughter—"I cannot financially support her, I have a bad financial situation." But in principle, why was her financial situation bad? I think that in Ukraine they do not live too badly... They almost all have their own home economy, kitchen garden, and everything... But a child... Excuse me, a child, does not need a palace... A child needs ordinary maternal affection... Yes, she was also not married. I do not understand anyway. But this is one's own creature, part of oneself, in a sense... To give it up, there needs to be a lot of courage, or simply, one does not love...one does not love anything alive... One loves only oneself... Even if she bears another child, she will always, nevertheless, feel herself morally dirty... To know that her [first] child is growing up somewhere else... On the other hand, I am very grateful to her for my daughter... If there were no such mothers, there would not be such a happy mother as I, either...'

Interpretation of cases

Historically in Russia, as in other countries, child abandonment has usually happened in the context of poverty, lack of social support, and single motherhood (Engel, Ransel 1988, pp. 3-10). The poor health of the offspring, the mother's age, and having other children who also live with her, could also play a role in some cases (Hrdy 1994). Feminist researchers also point to the problem of the woman's personal space and the difficulties she encounters finding a place both for her as an individual and her child as an individual in the new situation of motherhood (Field 1994), especially in the case of unwanted or even simply unexpected pregnancy, which has happened in an 'unfavourable situation' (which means poverty, lack of social support, and the absence of the child's father) and at the 'wrong time'. All this seems to be relevant in the contemporary Russian context of widening economic and political crisis (although the data were actually gathered some time ago, in a condition of relative stability compared to the present time—but the tendency now would be the same, except that, even more women are likely to find themselves in pitiful situations similar to those described here).

All of the following seems to play an important role in child abandonment by their mothers in my study.

Male partner problems: these can take the form of desertion by the man (in the cases of Raia, Larisa, Nastia, Tamara, Valia, Liuba); of the father being unknown (Zina); sometimes the father does not accept the child (see the cases of Nina, Lidia, Liuba, Valia, Tamara, Alisa, Nastia); sometimes he is unemployed (Lidia, Ella); there can also be no desire to form a family with the father on the part of the woman herself (Inna, Dasha, and Alisa do not want this).

Economic problems: these include unemployment, lack of child benefit, no practical feasibility of combining work and child care, and housing issues—most often, in the form of lack of access to affordable housing where the woman herself would be the master of the situation. Income may be simply insufficient, or insecure. Finally, the woman's lack of economic independence can play a crucial role.

Problems concerning personal space: these involve the need or desire to study; the wish to form a better relationship with (another) man; the desire to have a child in better conditions; the desire for better conditions and lifestyle for oneself, the wish to achieve social mobility/to

escape destitution; the 'wrong time' issue; and, finally, the desire to be on one's own, to have personal space in the pure sense of this word.

Social problems: generally, a lack of social connections. This has a twofold influence: on the one hand, there is no possibility of help with child care and income on the part of relatives or friends, and, on the other hand, there is the lack of social pressure not to abandon the child. Instability of status and 'bad' social connections (i.e. the family is destitute, alcoholic, and/or abusive, the woman herself was neglected, abandoned, or rejected as a child) play a significant role in several cases. Ideas about the right number of children per woman and appropriate conditions for bringing children into this world can also be of importance.

Legal problems: these involve the lack of legal status, most of all in the form of the lack of official Moscow residence registration, and therefore the impossibility of obtaining a free abortion; the lack of a right to stable affordable housing; limited access to free medical care; and the impossibility of temporary refusal of the newborn child.

Psychological and health-related problems: these can take the form of learning disabilities, fear of not being able to mother 'properly', and a feeling of lack of control over one's own life. All these and other reasons often lead to a late recognition of pregnancy, sometimes because of learning disabilities, sometimes simply because of unconscious denial of the fact out of self-preservation. Often, hormonal disorders (either there is no amenorrhea in pregnancy, or there always was amenorrhea in the absence of pregnancy) prevent the woman from recognizing the pregnancy in time, because such disorders lead to confusion about pregnancy indicators. In addition, such psychological problems as responsibility issues and fear of attachments play an important role in some cases.

Children-related problems: this particular child may have an instrumental meaning, that is, being just the means to an end in a game or a struggle for a man. The order of appearance of this child, and the age of the mother, are also important factors, though their influence is complex.

According to Hrdy (1994), the first child usually has more value for a mother than successive siblings. However, some young mothers find their first child relatively easy to give up as they think that they will have more children in the future in a better context. If a mother already has a child living with her, the second, third and subsequent children are reasonably easy to abandon, regardless of the mother's age. On the

other hand, the first child of a not very young mother, or one who suspects she may be subfertile, is difficult, impossible, or traumatic to abandon. Yet it should be noted that Ksenia with her hormonal disorder (who became pregnant just once during four years in the virtual absence of contraception) and Alisa (who may be inclined to a repetitive miscarriage problem) are very probably subfertile, and are not concerned about it. In general, the first children of older mothers are the least likely to be relinquished, and the second or subsequent children of younger mothers are the most likely. The sex of the child also plays a role, though again it is a difficult one to summarize succinctly. According to my own research, around a third of the women favoured sons, a third favoured daughters, and a third were indifferent to the child's sex. If the woman's decision concerning abandonment was heavily influenced by the views of the child's father, however, she would be more likely to relinquish a daughter than a son (as was the case with Lidia and Nina, for example). Ambivalence about motherhood seems to be an important underlying reason for the behaviour of the relinquishing mothers. All of the women in the sample said that they wanted children in principle. However, the degree of 'reality' of such assertions seems to be different, from Ksenia who perhaps actually does not want children at all, to Valia who opts for keeping her second child, who has a birth defect, as a single mother, being young and living in extremely unfavourable conditions. The desired number of children is also important. Finally, it is important to mention here the child's health problems.

As it is possible to see from the description of the cases, if at least one of the components changes in a favourable direction during the period of decision making,² a woman might change her mind, although the lack of material conditions in this case often results in temporary refusal rather than immediately taking the baby home.

The position that relinquishing mothers take on abortion demonstrates how acceptance of early abortion is sometimes associated with approval of a late one too (almost every relinquishing mother in the sample at least considered it, and some tried: for example, Dasha), and even with some half-hidden tolerance of infanticide (the cases of Ksenia and Raia). Most of the interviewed women either did not accept contraception or did not bother about it. They lacked overall control over their lives, which is necessary in order to believe in their ability to use contraception. Those who have hormonal health problems think that contraceptive use is therefore counter-indicated for them. Some were breast-

feeding a previous child while getting pregnant with the next one, and therefore they had no information about the timing of the first ovulation after the birth. Wide reliance on more 'natural' means such as coitus interruptus, douche, and sometimes condom, is good for these women's health, since the side-effects of these methods are minor in comparison with those of the Pill and the IUD, but the former 'natural' options do not prevent pregnancy reliably. Some women did not think about contraception at all, as they were in their first ever relationship or did not have regular sexual contacts at the time of the conception. In other cases, the pregnancy involved a more experienced woman who was attempting by this means to keep a man.

All the women in my sample saw abortion as acceptable, though some had reservations. Raia applied a 'statistical' approach towards abortion, counting how many abortions there were per woman on average, including those who never had abortions for whatever reason. For Lidia and some others, abortion was a responsible act; her male partner, her parents, and she herself considered it so. Just a few considered abortion to be a woman's right, though Ksenia thought that it was a woman's right at any point in the pregnancy, right up to the ninth month. Abandonment was usually considered to be worse than abortion. The relinquishing mothers felt guilty about abandoning their children, but not for attempting abortion. Indeed, all of them tried to explain why they did not have an abortion, even a late one seeming to them a responsible act and a better option than not to have an abortion at all.

Some interviewees considered the possibility of their children being adopted by others on the grounds that it was better to abandon a child than to abort it: 'Like this, he is alive at least'. Others were indifferent about whether their children were adopted by others, or did not want this.

Conclusion

Nowadays single motherhood leads to destitution more often than not; still some women who find themselves in a situation of unexpected single pregnancy can opt for keeping their babies, since it is accepted as a norm. However, they have to consider carefully their resources (money, social links, housing, etc.) while doing so. If they do not, they face the necessity of relinquishing a child or extreme poverty and helplessness. Reliance on abortion is now less safe than it was in the past, as

not everyone has access to free abortion or the money to pay for a 'commercial' one. Women often do not bother about contraception, but at the same time their reservations about contraceptive means are justified, in their view, by concerns about the harmful side effects of the 'stronger' and more reliable options. For all these reasons, abandonment of newborn babies is on the rise. However, adoption is now more widespread and easier to obtain than in former times, but still many children remain in children's homes due to superstitions concerning 'poor genes', and also due to the one-child family norm. Adoptive parents, as well as natural ones, prefer and/or can afford only one child per family more often than not. Last but not least are problems of personal space or bad timing for women, who sometimes relinquish their children even if they are happily married, just because they do not want them now. At the same time, for some other women rejection of their child means rejection of themselves. The role of men both in relinquishment and abortion decisions is important and contradictory. Often abortion is still considered the responsible decision on the woman's part in certain situations,³ rather than the woman's right to choose, in spite of the fact that now it is harder for her to obtain an abortion than it was before.

However, from one point of view it is possible to look at the phenomenon of child abandonment optimistically. At least in this case the child is still alive, so there is the possibility, though small, that something good can happen to him or her. As Lidia put it, 'You never know what will happen to you... And this girl who is now born to me, who knows, maybe she has nothing now, but in the future she might gain a lot...actually, no one is insured against anything...' Or, as Vera says: 'Thank God that they did not kill the baby. And thank God that now there is somewhere to place a child. After all, so be it'. On the other hand, one can find a source of optimism in that not all mothers give their babies up, even when 'objective' conditions favour such a solution. This was the case, for example, with Valia, discussed above. There is also the case of another single mother, as described by Vera:

She put him in a nursery, he fell ill with pneumonia, and then brain oedema occurred, so now he...cannot speak, he has difficulties in swallowing, his brain is almost dead, he cannot see anything...but she sees only this Petechka, he is ten years old and she carries him on her shoulders... She does not think of herself as a saint or see this as her predestination. She simply carries this through her life, and her eyes are bright. Here is a saint. 'God's business is quiet', she says, so the state of saint-

hood is quiet too. He is the meaning of her life, although there is nothing joyful in it, the boy is seriously ill, there is no future in all this. But...this is human life too. The mother accepts this, she does not leave her Petechka anywhere. Maybe a person who would put such a child into a special hospital is not to be blamed, but this one who does not do it, is worthy of the highest respect.

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NOTES

1. According to Lamb (see bibliography), nest builders are women who intentionally become single mothers since they for some reason want to have a family without a man's participation; *post hoc* acceptors are those who get pregnant not with this goal in mind, but who hope in vain to get a partner eventually; however, the *post hoc* acceptors finally welcome their single motherhood and find some way of adapting relatively well to that situation.

2. The most probable change in such a short period of time is that of the attitude of the baby's father, if there is one around; sometimes a woman experiences maternal feelings after the birth and/or it is her first child and she is not so young (25–26 years old; it is still considered in Russia that the best or even the only possible time, for health reasons, for a woman to have children is before the age of 25). In this case she might also change her mind about relinquishment as well.

3. Such as being in an unstable relationship, or when there is no desire for children in that relationship, especially on the part of the male partner; being single and living with one's parents or other relatives; having insufficient resources; etc.