

# We need to stop being afraid to say what really happened to these girls

## Society

### Elaine Byrne

As a nation, when we talk about mother and baby homes, we keep on finding ways to avoid saying certain words. That needs to change from now



In the first decade of Irish independence, the word “rape” is referenced on the Dáil record on just a handful of occasions. Politicians were concerned that rabbits were causing “immense damage to crops throughout the country”, particularly the rape crop. TDs were angered by attempted rapes by British forces and a “party of Specials with blackened faces” during the War of Independence.

In 1927, Kevin O’Higgins, the Minister for Justice, successfully argued that women should not participate on juries because of the “extremely unpleasant cases” which come before the courts, such as rape. O’Higgins did not wish to “subject women officials to a task of taking down verbatim evidence given in cases of that kind”.

Rape was a term used in agriculture. It was something the English enemy did to Irish women. Indeed, the fragile female mind was considered incapable of comprehending – never mind adjudicating upon – the concept of rape. The silence of the Dáil record would suggest that non-consensual sexual intercourse perpetrated against a woman was not a concern in this fledgling Irish nation.

Whether sex was consensual or not, and a child was born, the state adopted a hands-off approach. For instance, the debate on the Illegitimate Children (Affiliation Orders) Bill 1929 sought to oblige unmarried fathers to make a financial contribution towards the maintenance of their children.

James FitzGerald-Kenney, the then minister for justice, successfully argued for an amendment whereby the unmarried mother had to apply for this order in public court rather than the privacy of “in camera” proceedings.



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FitzGerald-Kenney, a Fine Gael barrister from Mayo, said many women were “immoral” and “not completely virtuous”. He described a scenario whereby a servant girl in the “employment of a respectable, well-to-do business man” would “blackmail” an innocent man of substantial means. He said there were “certain classes of people and illegitimacy seems to be almost hereditary with them”.

This amendment to put the private lives of women and their children in the public domain had the impact of making this attempt at financially supporting single mothers meaningless.

Last week’s report from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes noted how many local newspapers

published details of these cases. The names of both the mother and the “putative father” were published. Cases were often adjourned repeatedly, with many mothers ultimately withdrawing their claims.

A 1950 memorandum by the Adoption Society of Ireland claimed that “in only two out of 200 cases before the court was paternity successfully established”, and maintenance paid.

I mention this because the Mother and Baby Homes Report contains accounts of children who were raped by the type of men whom FitzGerald-Kenney described as respectable. Men of his own social class and standing in society perpetrated the rapes or colluded in the disappearance of their daughters and granddaughters to the homes.

There was the harrowing story of the 16-year-old domestic servant raped in a field. Her family felt they would be “ostracised in their neighbourhood if they reported the rape, because the perpetrator was a successful farmer”.

The child was “returned to the mother and baby home in which she had been born 16 years previously – and later, when friends and neighbours missed her in the area and asked where she was, they were told by her family she had been sent away to work”. This intergenerational legacy of shame transferred from mother to daughter to granddaughter.

There is a section in the Mother and Baby

Homes report which especially grates. On page two, it is stated that 5,616 “women” who were admitted to the homes were under 18 years of age with some as young as 12. This accounts for 11 per cent of all those who entered the homes, although the age of the mothers was not always known. The figure may well have been much higher as families attempted to disguise their “shame”.

Under Irish law and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, a child is legally defined as anyone under 18 years. These 5,616 “women” were children and should have been described as such within the report. The reference to women implies that the child had the same capacity to consent as an adult in a sexual act. They had no such thing.

For most of the 1922-1998 period covered by the report, it was an offence to have sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 17. Sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 15 was a particularly serious offence, which carried a potential penalty of life imprisonment.

The language within the report is jarring at times. It refers to “a witness who had, at 15 years old, become pregnant while she was involved with a man in his 50s”. She did not just “become pregnant”. She was 15 years old, and this was statutory rape.

The report also notes that it “has not seen evidence that the Gardaí were routinely notified about pregnancies in under-age

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women”. Again, if they were underage, they were children, not women. In the Dunboycne Home in Meath which operated between 1955 and 1991, one in four of its admissions were pregnant children.

There was a fear of naming what had happened. The girl was in a “family way”. She was a “first offender” who had “fallen”. A child who was “an innocent”, “weak-willed” or “feeble-minded”. She had “been carrying on with men since she was 17 years of age”.

For example, the Regina Coeli Hostel in Dublin recorded information about the circumstances of a woman’s pregnancy. The words rape or incest were not used and, instead, reference is made to the woman having been “assaulted”, or the putative father being a family member.

There are too many stories of the authorities deliberately turning a blind eye. Take the child who had been “badly” abused since she was 13 years old. When she told the local priest, she was accused of “trying to break up a family”, and that it was “her own fault”. An uncle told the Gardaí about the abuse, but nothing happened, and she became pregnant again. Her father severely beat her in an attempt to kill the baby. The baby died at birth, and she spent three weeks after the delivery recovering from the beating.

Then there was the 20-year-old woman who was gang-raped in a park, then found by a man who brought her to the Gardaí. She was put in a “cell overnight and freed the following morning having not been questioned”. She was later found in great distress “praying for her sins in a church (because she believed the rape had been her fault)”. Her baby died at birth.

This short article has used the word “rape” on more occasions than the Dáil and Seanad did in its first ten years of its existence. What words are we avoiding now as a country?

Fionn Davenport, a writer and broadcaster who was born in a mother and baby home in Dublin, gave a remarkable contribution on Today with Claire Byrne on RTE Radio 1 last Wednesday.

“It was a societal problem?” he asked. “If you blame everyone, no one is to blame. My problem is that individual agencies and individuals are to blame – as well as the state which allowed this to happen, and the Church which was the engineer of this happening,” he said.

“Are you telling me that society is responsible for that woman who told my birth mum that, no, she couldn’t keep her baby, that lied to her? Is that what I am supposed to take away from this?”

“The shame was not theirs – it was ours,” Taoiseach Micheál Martin said in his state apology. If that is so, then we must call out the individual politicians, priests and other “respectable” members of Irish society who perpetrated this violence on Irish women and children. We must stop being afraid of giving a name to what happened.

# Ireland was abusing its unwed mothers even before there was Church and state collusion

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### Colin Murphy

Twentieth-century Ireland was one of the most repressive sexual cultures in the world. Much of that is on the Catholic Church, but not all of it



In February 1935, the parish priest in Westport wrote to the Archbishop of Tuam to report that a local girl had had an “illegitimate” child. The baby had died within days, from natural causes “A denunciation will take place on Sunday next,” he informed his superior.

That denunciations from the altar happened is not news. But to denounce a young woman – who may herself, as his language indicated, have been legally a child – whose own child had just died? Such cruelty. Such thoughtlessness.

There is no shortage of such moments in the report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission. Often, they come framed in the language of penal authority. Young mothers were “first offenders”, “second offenders” or “persistent offenders”. The former needed to be “reformed”; the latter were “quasi-criminal” and “a danger to the community”. Women were “detained”. They spoke of “doing my term”.

Individual stories often involved a well-known trio of civil-religious authority: the doctor, the priest and the nun. Sometimes, the guards were involved. In the background, always, were the county council-

ors, county managers and local authority officials responsible for funding the homes and liaising with the religious who ran them.

The Department of Local Government and Public Health was embedded in the system through its inspectorate and its often-inept attempts to impose standards on the homes. An inspector for “boarded-out” children took it upon herself to investigate whether two of her former caseload, now young adults working in England, were “attending to their religious duties”. Irish consular officials in London were involved in repatriating pregnant Irish women to place them in homes.

Those seeking evidence of the collusion of Church and state in oppressing Irish women and children through much of the 20th century will find the report full of it. But to suggest that that collusion gives a complete answer to the question of why this happened is to raise further questions.

If the Catholic Church was to blame for institutionalised sexual oppression, why was Ireland an outlier even among Catholic countries in this regard? If the Church was so influential over the state and so dominant over society, how was there so much



**A shrine in Tuam, Co Galway, erected in memory of up to 800 children buried at the site of the former Mother and Baby Home**

rejection of Church teaching on issues unrelated to sex – specifically, on the national question?

The answer the report suggests is that this was bigger than Church and state. It involved the whole of society in a way that was particularly Irish and that predated both the creation of the state and the Catholic Church’s management of social policy. Ireland was abusing its unmarried mothers even before there was Church-state collusion.

In the 1850s, most of the children born in the workhouses in Ireland were to unmarried women, “lending weight to the evidence that unmarried mothers went into the workhouse to have their babies”, the sociologist Helen Burke found in her 1987

book *The People and the Poor* in 19th Century Ireland. An 1861 report found that a large part of female poverty consisted of “single females rendered destitute by pregnancy”.

By the 1950s, according to the 1954 report of the Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, Ireland had the lowest marriage rate, the highest number of unmarried men in their 40s, the oldest marriage age, and the highest fertility within marriage of a selection of countries. So few people married that those that did marry bore a disproportionate childbearing burden.

As the historian Kenneth Connell wrote in 1968, “the trend towards longer, if not lifelong, celibacy probably set in with the imminence of famine”. Connell’s work on “illegitimacy” before the Famine is cited in the Mother and Baby Homes report as evidence of the deep roots of the stigma and shame surrounding this issue.

A rural people whose survival was dependent on the ability of each individual plot of land to sustain a family put extraordinary emphasis on rules of sexual behaviour which had the effect of restraining and disciplining population growth. The family land could be inherited only by one child, to retain its viability. This child could not marry until he inherited. One sister would be married onto a neighbouring farm. Other siblings could not marry at all, as they would be unable to support a family.

The Church policed this moral economy; from the 1920s, the newly independent state championed it. But it was not imposed on the people from without: it sprang from the exigencies of a rural, peasant, colonised society. And for generations, even as we left those conditions behind, we perpetuated the moral architecture that we had built to cope with them.

Micheál Martin was heavily criticised last week, as was the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, for blaming “society”. But blame is not

zero-sum: there is plenty of it to go around. To speak of the way in which wider society supported the systems for dealing with unmarried mothers is not to diminish the responsibility of institutions and individuals of Church and state. It is simply to attempt to understand how 20th-century Ireland generated one of the most repressive sexual cultures in the world.

As Catherine Connolly noted in the Dáil last Wednesday, we are now 21 years into this saga of inquiries and apologies for the abuse that took place in Irish institutions and at the hands of Irish religious. It’s not over yet.

As this report by the commission notes, the conditions in county homes were far worse than in the mother and baby homes. The vast majority of these homes did not come under their remit.

The great as-yet-unacknowledged scandal is probably the incarceration of people in psychiatric institutions. Damien Brennan, a sociologist at Trinity College Dublin, has calculated that by the 1950s, there were, pro rata, more people living in psychiatric institutions in Ireland than anywhere else in the world. He has long called for a statutory commission to investigate this.

We should, by now, be better at this. Every inquiry features leaks; every inquiry wrestles with difficult questions of confidentiality and archives; every report launch is subject to the same tensions between obligations to the survivors and the demands of the political news cycle. Every apology is undermined by the knowledge that the promises that accompany it will remain in part unfulfilled.

The institutional memory of this commission will now be lost, as was that built up by the other commissions and inquiries before it. Perhaps it is now time for a standing commission, one with permanent resources and accumulated expertise – to pursue these issues of historical accountability and simultaneously to ensure that promises are fulfilled.