

Text of State Apology by An Taoiseach

Delivered in Dáil Eireann on the 13 January 2021 following the publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes

It is the duty of a republic to be willing to hold itself to account. To be willing to confront hard truths – and accept parts of our history which are deeply uncomfortable.

This detailed and highly painful report is a moment for us as a society to recognise a profound failure of empathy, understanding and basic humanity over a very lengthy period. Its production has been possible because of the depth of courage shown by all those who shared their personal experiences with the Commission. The report gives survivors what they have been denied for so long: their voice, their individuality, their right to be acknowledged.

Before going into detail about the report it is important to say that it would not have been possible without the steady determination of the former residents, their advocates and researchers who campaigned with them. I particularly want to acknowledge the critical part played by Catherine Corless whose work at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home site led directly to the establishment of the Commission. On behalf of the government I want to thank the three Commissioners – the Chair, Judge Yvonne Murphy, Professor Mary Daly, and Dr William Duncan — and their team.

Their Report reveals the dominant role of the churches and their moral code and lays bare the failures of the State. They have produced the definitive account of how this country responded to the particular needs of single women and their children at a time when they most needed support and protection. This should have been forthcoming from the fathers of their children, their family and friends, their community and their State, but so often it was not.

The often painful and distressing testimony of many survivors is presented in detail in the report of the confidential committee prepared by the Commission. Reading the Commission's findings and the report of the confidential committee the most striking thing is the shame felt by women who became pregnant outside of marriage and the stigma that was so cruelly attached to their children.

Testimonies from the women speak of the pressure to make sure that no one in their locality would find out about their pregnancy. One speaks of not being allowed to return to school after becoming pregnant because it would bring shame on the school. Extracts from witness accounts shine a light on the attitudes that women encountered:

“I was treated like a second class citizen by my family, society had an obsession with hiding everything”

“Nobody will want you now” said the mother of a witness, 14-years old when it was discovered that she was pregnant.

“Get her put away!” were the words of a father of a 19-year old when told of her pregnancy.

In the earlier decades covered by the report, witness testimony describes how a dearth of sex education often left young women confused and unaware of how and why they had even become pregnant. Some of these pregnancies were as a result of rape and/or incest.

Children born outside of marriage were stigmatised and were treated as outcasts in school and in wider society. Some children who were subsequently boarded-out experienced heartbreaking

exploitation, neglect and abuse within the families and communities in which they were placed. This was unforgiveable. The sense of abandonment felt by many of these children is palpable in the witness accounts. The circumstances of their birth, the arrangements for their early care, the stigma they experienced and the continuing lack of birth information, is a terrible burden in their lives.

Many women, children and fathers left these shores to escape this unfair judgement and life-long prejudice and because they thought it was the only way to protect their families' reputations. While many have built good lives for themselves, many did not overcome the impact which these formative experiences had on their lives and may have suffered and struggled with many serious personal problems.

One of the clearest messages of the testimonies in this report is how this treatment of women and children is something which was the direct result of how the State, and how we as a society acted.

The Report presents us with profound questions. We embraced a perverse religious morality and control, judgementalism and moral certainty, but shunned our daughters. We honoured piety, but failed to show even basic kindness to those who needed it most. We had a completely warped attitude to sexuality and intimacy, and young mothers and their sons and daughters were forced to pay a terrible price for that dysfunction.

To confront the dark and shameful reality which is detailed in this report we must acknowledge it as part of our national history. And for the women and children who were treated so cruelly we must do what we can, to show our deep remorse, understanding and support.

And so, on behalf of the Government, the State and its citizens, I apologise for the profound generational wrong visited upon Irish mothers and their children who ended up in a Mother and Baby Home or a County Home. As the Commission says plainly — “they should not have been there”. I apologise for the shame and stigma which they were subjected to and which, for some, remains a burden to this day.

In apologising, I want to emphasise that each of you were in an institution because of the wrongs of others. Each of you is blameless, each of you did nothing wrong and has nothing to be ashamed of. Each of you deserved so much better. The lack of respect for your fundamental dignity and rights as mothers and children who spent time in these institutions is humbly acknowledged and deeply regretted.

The Irish State, as the main funding authority for the majority of these institutions, had the ultimate ability to exert control over these institutions, in addition to its duty of care to protect citizens with a robust regulatory and inspection regime. This authority was not exerted and the State's duty of care was not upheld. The State failed you, the mothers and children in these homes.

The report brings a considerable amount of previously unknown information into the public domain. It has exposed the truth, once hidden, to reveal significant failures of the State, the Churches and of society. Women were admitted to mother and baby homes and county homes because no supports were forthcoming from any other quarter. They were forced to leave home, and seek a place where they could stay without having to pay. Many were destitute.

In the personal testimonies of how many women ended up in these institutions, the Priest, the Doctor and the Nun loom large. The sense of oppression, even at this distance, is overwhelming. Women, terrified by the consequences of their pregnancy becoming known to their family and neighbours entered mother and baby homes to protect their secret. And the pressure to maintain this secret added insult to injury and was a large part of the mother's trauma.

Conditions in the homes varied. Before the 1960s living conditions in many private Irish households were generally poor. In the congregated settings of Mother and Baby Homes poor sanitary conditions had much more serious consequences for disease and infection control. County homes as well as Kilrush and Tuam are identified as having appalling conditions. Conditions in other mother and baby homes were better and improved over time.

Many of the women suffered emotional abuse and were often subject to denigration and derogatory remarks from the religious, with little kindness shown, especially when giving birth. The overall picture is of a hard, cold and uncaring environment.

One of the most disquieting features of the report is that up until 1960 mother and baby homes appear to have significantly reduced the prospects of survival of children. The death rate among infants in mother and baby homes was almost twice that of the national average for children born outside of marriage. A total of about 9,000 children died in the institutions under investigation — about 15% of all the children who were in their care.

It is deeply distressing to note that the very high mortality rates were known to local and national authorities at the time and were recorded in official publications. However, there is little or no evidence of State intervention in response to these chilling statistics. In fact, a number of reports actually identifying the problems were not acted on.

I know it will be a disappointment that the report does not answer all the deeply personal questions on the burial arrangements for many of the children who died in these institutions — in many cases the burial location remains unknown. There are no records for a number of the large institutions where significant numbers of infants are known to have died — including Tuam, Bessborough, Castlepollard and Sean Ross. While this is difficult, options for dignified remembrance and memorialisation will be implemented where this is not already the case.

While women may not have been strictly legally forced to enter these homes, the fact is that most had no alternative, especially those who did not have the support of their family or independent financial means. Overall, the Commission concludes that Ireland was a cold and harsh environment for the majority of its residents during the earlier half of the period under investigation.

It was especially cold and harsh for women. All women suffered serious discrimination. Women who gave birth outside marriage were subject to particularly harsh treatment.

Emerging from the survivor stories are the horrific accounts of rape, either perpetrated within families or by someone within a woman's community. This led ultimately to entry into a Mother and Baby Home where the woman bore a social stigma but there was no accountability for the men responsible, and the agencies of the State showed little or no interest in addressing these crimes.

The Commission acknowledges the additional impact which a lack of knowledge and understanding had on the treatment and outcomes of mothers and children with different racial and cultural heritage, those who faced mental health challenges, or those with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Such discriminatory attitudes exacerbated the shame and stigma felt by some of our most vulnerable citizens, especially where opportunities for non-institutional placement of children were restricted by an unjust belief that they were unsuitable for placement with families.

While context is essential to our proper understanding of this chapter of our history, it does not lessen what happened or diminish the responsibility of Church and State for the failures laid bare in what we have learned. For much of the period covered by the Commission, women as a group and regardless

of age or class were systematically discriminated against in relation to employment, family law, and social welfare, solely because of their gender.

Children were similarly unequal, and none more so than those who were cruelly labelled “illegitimate”. I share deeply the Commission’s unequivocal view, that the existence of the status of “illegitimacy” until 1987 in this country “was an egregious breach of human rights”. This was a huge injustice and blighted the lives of many.

It is a sad truth that the history of human kind, even to today, has largely been defined by a failure to acknowledge and vindicate the rights and status of women and the labelling of those who failed to conform to social norms. We cannot account for what happened elsewhere, but we can and must do so for what happened in our country.

An apology on its own is not enough. We, collectively in this House, will be judged by our actions. Actions always speak louder than words.

The Government accepts and will respond to all of the recommendations made by the Commission, and this response will centre on four pillars of Recognition, Remembrance, Records and Restorative Recognition. Recognition begins with this apology and will be followed by commitments to national and local memorialisation and commemoration.

The views and wishes of former residents will be paramount and all commemoration will be led by them. A broad suite of memorialisation, educational and research commitments will support national reflection and enduring remembrance. Future generations will learn of Mother and Baby Homes and of the experiences of former residents, particularly as told through their own words.

With regard to records, the Government is committed to introducing information and tracing legislation as a priority. Access to one’s own identity is a basic right. We will also be advancing a range of related actions to support access to personal information and to ensure appropriate and sensitive archiving of institutional records.

Finally, turning to Restorative Recognition. Similar to the Magdalenes, an enhanced medical card will be given to former residents of a Mother and Baby Home or County Home. This is in addition to counselling, which is immediately available to all former residents, and patient liaison support services, which will be available to all former residents. The Government will also design a scheme of Restorative Recognition for former residents and an Interdepartmental Group will report back to Government on this as soon as possible.

All of these commitments will be advanced in a survivor-centred manner, with ongoing communication and engagement as plans are developed and implemented.

As a nation, it is important to understand and accept the failings of our past; important but not sufficient. We must also learn from them. We have adopted national and international laws which oblige us to follow a different, more humane and right-based approach. There is in place and being further developed a wide range of social services completely absent for much of our history.

Under Minister O’Gorman, we have a Government Department dedicated to children, to equality and to working across Government and society to promote and uphold the rights of all people.

The Citizens’ Assembly is examining further measures to address structural inequalities in relation to gender. It is looking in particular at how we can support and respond to the needs of those with caring responsibilities.

Through our laws and policies, our systems, structures and services, our actions and our words, we must always seek to create a more just society, grounded in respect, diversity, tolerance and equality. Continued investment in education, especially for those at the margins and the most vulnerable, is the surest way of making sure that we do not repeat the past.

Similarly, we must learn the lesson that institutionalisation, creates power structures and abuses of power and must never again be an option for our country. Throughout this report former residents talk of a feeling of shame for the situation they found themselves in.

The shame was not theirs – it was ours.

It was our shame that we did not show them the respect and compassion which we as a country owed them. It remains our shame.

I want to reassure survivors, their families and the country, that this Government is determined to act on all the recommendations of the Report and to deliver the legislative change necessary to at least start to heal the wounds that endure.”