

Chapter 9: Attitudes

Introduction

Unmarried motherhood has proved as problematic in Ireland as it has in most other European countries. Reflecting badly on the moral character of the woman, unmarried motherhood carried a stigma that was almost impossible to shake.¹

- 9.1 The attitudes towards unmarried mothers and their children and how they changed over time are illustrated throughout the Commission's report. This chapter does not pretend to duplicate that information. It examines some of the broader aspects of that topic including Irish society's attitudes towards marriage and sexual reproduction and the relationship between Catholic teaching, government and Irish society, as a prelude to exploring the attitudes towards unmarried mothers and their children in Ireland and internationally. In relation to Ireland the focus is on statements by national and local politicians, clergy, public servants and professional women and men. Chapter 8, which gives short case histories of many women who contacted the Department of Local Government and Public Health from the 1940s to the 1960s, contains extensive evidence about the attitudes and behaviour of families and putative fathers. The time period covered by this chapter is from the early-twentieth century until approximately the late 1960s. This cut-off date is determined by a major change in the nature of the evidence at that time. Until the mid-1960s, almost all the evidence comes from court cases, reports of local authority meetings, sermons, evidence to government inquiries, government files, and a small number of articles in periodicals and newspapers.
- 9.2 The most common public response to 'illegitimacy' in the past was silence - though that did not preclude gossip, ostracism and widespread censure. Most of the Irish material cited in this chapter comes from the 1920s and the 1930s; there was relatively little discussion of unmarried mothers in the 1940s or the 1950s, except in relation to adoption - and the focus in that material was on the children and would-be adoptive parents. At no time in the first 50 years after independence was unmarried motherhood a dominant preoccupation for politicians, churchmen, public servants or the media. Catholic clergy preached about the decline in moral standards but they rarely made specific reference to unmarried mothers; local

¹ Maria Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880-1973', *Women's history review*, xx, 1 (2011), p. 110.

councillors denounced the cost of unmarried mothers and their children to ratepayers, and so-called experts expressed opinions about the intellectual, moral and emotional state of unmarried mothers and perhaps their children. Media coverage was generally indirect, likewise the references in Lenten pastorals, Dáil debates and other public fora. When a priest or a bishop thundered from the pulpit about the evils of modern life, 'illegitimacy' was generally mentioned only *en passant* in a litany of 'occasions of sin' that included dance-halls, cinemas, motor cars, immodest dress and immoral literature. References to unmarried mothers in publicly available media were limited until at least the 1960s and, with the exception of infanticide cases, they tended to be couched in indirect language, and they rarely provided any sense of the women and their stories: their voices are absent.

- 9.3 There is much more public reportage and debate about extra-marital pregnancy and about the treatment of the mothers and their children from the mid-1960s - this is discussed in chapter 12. By then attitudes were changing, and the expanding media coverage informed policy towards the mothers and their children. One underlying question is whether attitudes and practice towards unmarried mothers were significantly different in Ireland than elsewhere - and if so, what determined these differences? With that question in mind, this chapter opens with a discussion of Irish society and the Irish family in the early-twentieth century.

The family in early-twentieth century Ireland

- 9.4 Ireland was a predominantly rural and agrarian society until the 1960s. Provincial towns mirrored the structures and attitudes of farming Ireland - they were also dominated by family businesses, social gradations, and familial networks. In the decades after the great famine of the 1840s Irish society developed some distinct features - a sustained high rate of emigration; a pattern of late marriages and a low marriage rate, but those who married had very large families, particularly when the late age of marriage is taken into account. Approximately one in four adults aged 45 and older were unmarried and it would appear that only a minority of single adults were sexually active. At various stages during the years from the 1920s to the early 1960s fears were expressed about the low marriage rate and the reluctance of Irish men to marry. These were probably best encapsulated in the edited collection *The Vanishing Irish*, published in the mid-1950s, which warned that 'Today Ireland is teetering perilously on the brink of near extinction'. Most of the blame was placed on 'the strangest species on the face of the earth today [is]

the Irish bachelor', who 'Instead of engaging in the social life common to men and women in other countries, the Irish bachelors spend their evenings in "pubs", engrossed in cards, drinking and endless chatter about horse racing'.²

9.5 Attitudes towards 'illegitimacy' and premarital pregnancy were shaped by a wider social system governing decisions about marriage, inheritance, emigration and authority within the family. Marriages were few and late because of a wish to preserve the family farm/family business and pass it intact to the next generation. Matchmaking and dowries formed an integral part of the marriage process and marriage was often linked with transfer of the family enterprise. Attitudes towards 'illegitimate' births and extra-marital sex must be seen in that context. One sociologist used the term 'prolonged parental control' when describing Irish families.³ Earner-Byrne suggested that the 'very existence' of unmarried mothers and their children 'violated all understandings of family and morality... Understandings of sexuality and appropriate sexual behaviour in Ireland were informed by the cultural understanding of the family and its social status. There was little room for sexual individualism in a society that considered the family guilty by association with very real consequences'.⁴

9.6 In the 1930s a team of anthropologists from Harvard carried out a study of life in county Clare, and although some elements of their analysis are open to question, their research provides a framework for exploring attitudes towards the unmarried mother and her child and they identify features that might help to explain why Irish attitudes towards 'illegitimacy' might differ from those in other countries. In the Irish countryside, and to a lesser extent among small town businesses, inheritance was critical. By the 1920s most farmers owned their farm and they were determined that it should remain intact and in family ownership. Families were large but there was no automatic right of inheritance, for example, by the eldest son. Land almost always went to a son or nephew, not to a female relative. The father, and if he was dead, the mother, determined who would inherit. Arensberg and Kimball described the father as 'the court of last resort, which dispenses punishment for deviations from the norm in all spheres'.⁵ They noted that 'the

² John A. O'Brien (ed), *The vanishing Irish. The enigma of the modern world* (London, 1955), pp 1, 32.

³ A.J. Humphries, 'Migration to Dublin: its social effects', *Christus Rex*, ix, 3 (1955), pp 192-6.

⁴ Earner-Byrne, 'Reinforcing the family: the role of gender morality and sexuality in Irish welfare policy, 1922-1944', *History of the family*, xiii, 4 (2008), p. 363.

⁵ Conrad Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Harvard University Press, second edition, 1968), p. 55.

family relationships regulate sexual conduct...the technological training of the individual [in farming] goes hand in hand with the sexual. Marriage prohibitions, like the sanctions of the exercise of sexual rights in marriage, are part of and take their form in family groups'.⁶ A son who deviated from acceptable norms - by marrying a young woman without a dowry or a woman from a less respectable family - perhaps the daughter of a farm labourer - would not inherit. Matchmaking was central to marriage among 'respectable' families in rural/small town Ireland. It involved assessing 'the relative status of the families and any possible barriers to the union, such as consanguinity, insanity, or notorious crime in past ancestry'. Arensberg and Kimball cite the case of a man who eloped with a servant girl; his mother would not let him return home - she sold the farm. A daughter who married in a runaway match was disowned by her family. 'A runaway match upsets the whole pattern'; it generally involved "marrying beneath"; in such cases 'the son is usually cut off and the daughter leaves a very good place for nothing but a cabin and they get none of the money'.⁷

- 9.7 If a runaway match was punished in this manner, giving birth to an 'illegitimate' child was regarded as an even greater crime.

To "destroy a girl's character" in the countryside is to upset the pattern of family and community life by overthrowing the possibility of an orderly change in farm succession. Much more than a shooting or a fight, a sexual irregularity which cannot be righted in a match is capable of destroying the intricate mutual obligation and expectancies of rural familism.

- 9.8 In some cases a match was hastily arranged for the couple; the alternative was 'to expel the offenders bodily'.⁸ While expulsion was a more common fate for the woman, some men who were known to have fathered an 'illegitimate' child were forced to emigrate and lost their prospects of inheriting the family farm. Arensberg and Kimball claimed that such action would be supported by the community. The knowledge that a woman had an 'illegitimate' child would damage the marriage prospects of her brother(s) and sister(s). The 'family' often extended well beyond the nuclear unit, so knowledge or rumours of 'illegitimacy' among cousins, nieces or nephews could impact on a family's standing in the community. Emigration was often the only option, though some men who were known to have fathered a child

⁶ *Family and Community in Ireland*, p. 78.

⁷ *Family and Community in Ireland*, pp 106, 114-115.

⁸ *Family and Community in Ireland*, p. 208.

might manage to remain at home. There was a close association between a family's standing and the sexual status of that family.⁹

- 9.9 The late age of marriage reinforced the need for a stringent code of sexual relations; 'the comment and attitude of the small farmers towards sexual behaviour cannot be divorced from their appreciation of status in family or community'. Arensberg and Kimball reported that

The farmers and their wives were full of animus against 'the "crabbit" great "bucks" of lads who led girls astray and from whom the innocent were not safe'. However they also believed that 'the pure young maidens are also not without blame'. On the specific topic of premarital intercourse and 'illegitimacy', 'the question would arise. Would you believe such a thing could happen in Ireland? In such countries as England and America well it might, for there, the country people hear, the boys and girls just take a liking for one another and go off and marry and "never mind the money". And we remember that in this case the "money" means the re-formation of the entire two families as well'.

- 9.10 They suggested that 'country people' did not explain premarital sex or 'illegitimacy' in terms of emotions, but rather that 'young "bucks"' tried deliberately to impregnate the girls and force marriages. They were motivated by greed for land and dowries. 'Sex without familism seems beyond the country people's imagination'. 'Illegitimacy' or premarital sex was identified with 'the debased conduct of the lower ranks of the landless and disreputable of the countryside, the labourers of the towns, the runaways, remnants of broken households'.¹⁰

- 9.11 A man or woman who was known to have been involved in a premarital pregnancy lost their standing within the community and were viewed as akin to the disreputable lower social orders. Earner-Byrne claimed that 'sex outside wedlock demeaned the family and threatened the social order'. She further noted that 'The issue of reputation was central to much of the social control exercised in Ireland. The fear of the loss of one's reputation was based largely on the understanding of the family as a unit: if one member disgraced themselves the rest of the family was tarnished'.¹¹

⁹ *Family and Community in Ireland*, p. 210.

¹⁰ *Family and Community in Ireland*, pp 197, 199, 203 and 204.

¹¹ Earner-Byrne, 'Reinforcing the family', p. 363.

- 9.12 Arensberg and Kimball are unusual in explicitly addressing the question of 'illegitimacy'. Robert Cresswell's account of Irish rural society in the 1950s, which was centred around Kinvara (close to where Arensberg and Kimball had conducted their field-work), does not mention 'illegitimacy'.¹² Sklar suggested that in Ireland 'the problems posed by illegitimacy were aggravated because inheritance of property was the basis for a marriage and thus the basis also for maintaining or improving relative social and economic status. Lines of descent and inheritance had to be defined clearly and unambiguously so that families could assess with reasonable assurance whether a match would sustain or improve their social standing, and the legal status of an illegitimate child made such assessment difficult, if not impossible'.¹³
- 9.13 Inheritance, dowries and matchmaking were less important in Dublin and other cities and large towns, and they had no significance for working-class families, but a family's standing remained critical. Humphreys, who carried out field-work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, suggested that Dublin families kept a very close eye on their children's potential marriage partners. The following quotation concerns the family of a skilled worker. 'When a boy and girl began to take serious interest in one another, their parents, according to one of the Dunn's neighbours, would investigate each other's family "root and stock, seed, breed and generations". The parents were less concerned about money, than "what sort of people they were"'.¹⁴
- 9.14 Some of the more thoughtful comments about Irish unmarried mothers were very critical of family attitudes towards an extra-marital pregnancy. In 1936 Gertrude Gaffney published a series of articles about Irish women in England. One article, which concentrated on pregnant single women, was titled, 'Unchristian attitude of parents':

All the priests, nuns, and lay people connected with rescue work in London spoke with great severity of the unchristian and inhuman attitude in Ireland towards the unmarried mother, and declared that this attitude made their problem so much more difficult and gave the girl or child very little chance of making good.

Mother's Attitude

¹² Robert Cresswell, *Une communauté rurale de l'Irlande* (Paris, 1969).

¹³ June Sklar, 'Marriage and nonmarital fertility: a comparison of Ireland and Sweden', *Population and Development Review*, 3 (June 1977), p. 362.

¹⁴ Alexander J. Humphreys, *New Dubliners, Urbanization and the Irish family* (London, 1966), p. 116.

One priest told me of a girl brought to him who was the daughter of a well-off farmer. When her people discovered her condition, her mother had given her enough money to get to London, and told her she never wanted to see her again.

'Can you imagine,' he asked me, 'any mother treating her child like that? I wrote to the priest about her. I wanted them to take the girl back again and let her put the child into a place where she could see her from time to time. But the mother would not have her. And I am sorry to say the priest took her side. Do you think that would have been the attitude of Our Lord?

You can tell them in Ireland that what they want is more charity and more Christianity in their outlook on these matters.

We have no trouble at all with the English girls; their relatives will take both the girl and the child, and if the girl goes back to work they will bring up the child and give it the same normal existence as any other child. And the man will usually contribute something. The Englishman takes his responsibility in these matters. The Irishman gets off scot free; he has the same callousness as the parents and relatives, and everything is done to encourage that callousness'.¹⁵

- 9.15 In 1951 the gynecologist Bethel Solomons addressed the annual general meeting of the Dublin Magdalen Asylum (later known as Denny House), a mother and baby home that admitted Protestant women. He said 'that there was nobody more neglected than the unmarried mother and he thought it was "disgraceful" the way parents treated their unmarried daughters. In his long experience of obstetrics he had seen many girls who would not "have gone to the bad" if their fathers and mothers had looked after them in their trouble'.¹⁶
- 9.16 The damage that an extra-marital pregnancy would do to a family's social standing was undoubtedly a major factor in the reluctance of many pregnant Irish women to inform their parents/family and it might explain, but cannot justify, the hostile reaction that they often encountered if a pregnancy became known to a woman's family or the local community. This hostility explains the quest for privacy - the tendency for women to leave home and move either to Dublin or to England. There is substantial evidence of this search for anonymity; pregnant women who were repatriated from Britain frequently refused to enter the mother and baby

¹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 15 Dec. 1936.

¹⁶ *Irish Times*, 25 May 1951.

home that was closest to their home (see Chapters 7 and 8). The wish for anonymity was also cited by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary as the reason why women were given a different first name in mother and baby homes. Although this explanation is disputed, it should not necessarily be rejected out of hand, and the practice of giving women a different name was not confined to Ireland.¹⁷

- 9.17 Within the family pregnant women appear to have found more sympathy from female relatives; or perhaps they were more inclined to confide in their mother or sister. Rattigan and Guilbride, both writing about infanticide, quoted women who expressed fears at the response of their brother(s) or father if they discovered her pregnancy - 'afraid of her brothers to go home'. But they also record cases where pregnant women feared their mothers; some instances of sympathetic fathers and women who came under pressure from relatives to kill their infant. Shame was 'one of the motivating factors in a number of cases involving relatives of the birth mother who assisted the infanticide; one mother explained that they had assisted in the infanticide in order "to shield her daughter's shame"'.¹⁸ Rattigan noted that 'in Ireland, and in rural Ireland in particular, the police pursued and investigated rumours about unmarried pregnant women...communities across Ireland felt they had the right to intervene and inform the authorities about unmarried women suspected of having killed an infant or concealed its birth. Sexual transgression was seriously frowned upon by most Irish people at this time. There appears to have been little sympathy for single women who became pregnant outside wedlock. Rural communities did not support such women; instead, they informed on them. In so doing they made clear their intolerance of such behaviour'.¹⁹
- 9.18 One of the most common responses historically to an extra-marital pregnancy was for the couple to marry before the birth of their child. In 1939 the UK Registrar General estimated that almost 30% of all mothers were single when they became pregnant with their first child, though almost 70% of these women married before the child was born.²⁰ Thane and Evans suggest that one factor in the rise in

¹⁷ Women in Pelletstown and Tuam used their own names; women in Denny House traditionally were not known by their own name; there is no evidence that this happened in Bethany. For the USA see Marian J. Morton, *And sin no more. Social policy and unwed mothers in Cleveland 1855-1990* (1993, Cleveland), p. 10.

¹⁸ Cliona Rattigan, 'What else could I do?' *Single mothers and infanticide in Ireland 1900-1950* (Dublin, 2012), pp 107-12. Rattigan, "'Done to death by father or relatives". Irish families and infanticide cases, 1922-50', *The history of the family*, xiii, 4 (2008), pp 370-83, Guilbride's unpublished thesis, is cited on p. 378.

¹⁹ Rattigan, 'What else could I do?' p. 188.

²⁰ Jenny Keating, *A child of one's own. The history of adoption in England, 1918-45* (London, 2009), p 17.

'illegitimate' births during both the first and second World Wars was the difficulty that couples might face in marrying - because of military service, or the death or imprisonment of the father.²¹ There does not appear to be comparable data for Ireland. In the years 1943-45, just under 7% of married women who gave birth in Dublin city had been married for less than six months.²² Fr Anthony Gaughan, writing about his experiences as a priest in a working-class Dublin city parish in the early 1960s, claimed that 'quite a few' of the marriages at which he officiated were 'ARPs - the sign we put after marriages where the young lady was already pregnant'.²³ Given Ireland's low marriage rate and the proportion of marriages that were dependent on inheritance or parental approval, Irish couples may have found it difficult to arrange a prenatal marriage; this is indicated in some of the stories told in Chapter 8. The reluctance of Irish bachelors to marry may have resulted in a lower proportion of post-conception marriages than elsewhere. However in 1966 the master of the Coombe Hospital, Dr Feeney, claimed that approximately half of 300 unmarried women who enrolled in the hospital's antenatal clinic, (he does not give the time period) married before the birth of their child.²⁴

- 9.19 Given the stigma associated with births outside marriage, it is not surprising that impressionistic evidence suggests that the proportion of children of Irish unmarried mothers who were raised within the maternal family was lower than elsewhere. Lucy Desmond of the Liverpool and County Catholic Society told the Carrigan Committee that 'The ordinary Catholic girl of this City [Liverpool] who falls does not run away from home - she goes into the institution and returns with her baby into the family circle again. The Irish girl, D.V.²⁵ has the sense of shame and flees, but all this does not solve the problem'.²⁶ In England in the 1930s and 1940s 'many unmarried mothers and their children vanished from the official record through absorption into the mother's own family'.²⁷ In 1933 21% of 'illegitimate' children in Manchester lived with their maternal grandmother. Thane and Evans relate the story of a grandmother who asked the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child to arrange for her daughter's baby to be adopted because she was

²¹ Pat Thane & Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford, 2012), p. 13.

²² Stanley Lyon, 'Natality in Dublin in the years 1943, 1944 and 1945', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, xviii (1947-48), p. 66

²³ Anthony Gaughan, *At the coalface. Recollections of a city and country parish, 1950-2000* (Dublin, 2000), p. 56.

²⁴ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448171.

²⁵ Deo Volente, a Latin phrase that means God willing.

²⁶ National Archives Ireland, JUS/90/4: Criminal Law Amendment Committee 1929-1934.

²⁷ Pat Thane, 'Unmarried motherhood in twentieth century England', *Women's history review*, xx, 1 (2011), p. 15.

raising her five children and could not cope with an additional child.²⁸ There would have been many similar grandmothers in Ireland. A survey carried out in England in 1945 of 7,500 children born in areas with high rates of 'illegitimate' births, reported that 81% of the infants remained with their mothers and 59% of these mothers were living with their parents.²⁹ These statistics suggest that if an unmarried mother was to keep her child, she needed the support of her family, and a willingness to accept mother and child to live in the family home.

9.20 In Ireland neighbourhoods and communities were close-knit; it would be difficult to pass off a young child as the offspring of her grandparents; her/his presence would be a constant reminder of the family's loss of status. Even if such prejudices could be overcome, Irish families were among the largest in the western world at this time. Most houses were small and they were often overcrowded, so an additional child would have been a major inconvenience and a drain on resources. Many families were poor. Marriage of the inheriting son was dependent on the house being cleared of non-inheriting siblings. In the early 1960s the Limerick Rural Survey reported that many farmers' sons were unable to marry, even after the death of both parents, because they had a brother(s) and/or sister(s) living in the family farmhouse.³⁰ An unmarried mother returning home with her child, and an 'illegitimate' child/grandchild as a long-term resident would have jeopardised an heir's marriage prospects. Until the 1960s Irish couples married at a late age; around 29-30 for women and mid 30s for men - much later than in other countries, which again made it more difficult for an Irish grandmother to pass off a grandchild as her child and meant that in some cases the grandmother was dead or incapacitated.

9.21 Concern with a family's reputation and an unwillingness to take a daughter and her child into the family home influenced decisions about a pregnant woman leaving her home and her local community and going to a mother and baby home. Nicholson's 1968 study of English mother and baby homes noted that

There seemed to be a regional difference in the prevalent attitude towards illegitimacy. All the factors which might reflect the force of social pressures were more marked in the south than in the north. There were proportionately more residents in the southern region than in the north who concealed their

²⁸ Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 36.

²⁹ Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 62.

³⁰ Patrick McNabb, 'Demography', in Jeremiah Newman (ed.), *Limerick Rural Survey, 1958-64* (Tipperary, 1964), p. 227.

pregnancy from their family...more likely to have moved away from home during pregnancy and less likely to return to parents on leaving Home. Less likely to have contact with friends and relatives.

- 9.22 She suggested that unmarried mothers in the south of England 'had suffered more than those in the north from the social stigma'. In the north of England 'unmarried mothers were left in no doubt of their neighbour's disapproval and they themselves felt they warranted it. But with the disapproval of their conduct went sympathy...willingness to ease the difficulties...offers of practical kindness'.³¹ In the United States in the 1950s black families were much more willing to accept the child of an unmarried daughter whereas 'If a girl were white and broadly middle class...there was a pretty fair chance her parents would pack her off to a maternity home just before she began to "show"'. A family's standing in the community, and with their friends and their local church was a key consideration.³² Greenlees, writing about Scotland states that 'throughout the twentieth century, family support was a crucial factor in enabling women to keep their baby, including acceptance of themselves and their baby and with practical financial support'.³³

Religion

- 9.23 The Irish Catholic church enjoyed a dominant position in Irish society until the closing decades of the twentieth century. In the decades between the end of the great famine and Irish independence the overall population almost halved; the number of Catholic clergy doubled and the number of religious sisters quadrupled. This expansion in the number of religious continued after independence; the peak was in the mid-1960s. Many Irish families had a close relative who was a priest, religious sister or a religious brother. In rural parishes the priest was often the best educated member of the community (and the best-educated member of his family); in provincial towns he belonged to the tiny educated and social elite. Their education and an attitude of assumed authority meant that priests were often viewed as community leaders. They were the managers of the local national school; commonly chaired the vocational education committee, determined whether a particular book was suitable for the public library, and they played a leading role in community development, and in securing government assistance - leading a delegation to Dublin seeking a new industry or a new school. Many

³¹ Jill Nicholson, *Mother and baby homes: a survey of homes for unmarried mothers* (London, 1968), pp 59-60.

³² Rickie Solinger, *Wake up little Susie* (New York, 2000 edition), pp 1- 5.

³³ Janet Greenlees, *Unmarried motherhood in Scotland during the twentieth century: Mother and Baby homes* (Nov. 2015), p. 24.

families, faced with a pregnant unmarried daughter, sought their advice; files also indicate that some women confided in a priest rather than her family. So their advice was often sought and followed though it should be noted that only a small minority of women in the mother and baby homes give 'religious' as a referral pathway.

- 9.24 The nineteenth century was a deeply religious age, marked by increased church attendance, a 'devotional revolution' among Irish Catholics, and a militant evangelical movement among Irish Protestants - which has been described as 'the second reformation'. Catholic and Protestant churches shared a common fear that people in need, especially unmarried mothers and their children, or impoverished widows and destitute married couples, would consent to their children being raised in a different religious denomination in return for economic assistance.³⁴ This denominational competition was a major impetus for the establishment of mother and baby homes and charities such as St Patrick's Guild and the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland.
- 9.25 During the nineteenth century the Irish Catholic church sought to overcome the discrimination that it had experienced under the penal laws. As part of that process it created an infrastructure of Catholic hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable institutions that were designed to ensure that Catholics no longer had to rely on Protestant charities. The British administration in Ireland was willing to delegate the running of institutions, such as industrial schools and nursing services in the workhouses, to female and male Catholic religious communities. By doing so it fostered a network of state-supported charitable institutions and state-run institutions, such as workhouses, where important roles, such as manager or matron, were delegated to members of religious communities. This network of state-supported, sometimes state-controlled (as in Kilrush, Tuam and Pelletstown) institutions, staffed and run by religious communities expanded after independence, and this gave the Catholic church, and Protestant charities the capacity to influence policy and practice within social and medical institutions. This delegation of responsibility for major aspects of health and welfare care also limited the capacity of government to implement change. For example, in the 1940s the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) was

³⁴ Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican women in Dublin: philanthropy, politics and education in the early twentieth century* (Dublin, 2005), pp 166-7; Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Letters of the Catholic Poor. Poverty in independent Ireland, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, 2017), pp 107-117.

unable to secure the removal of a superior in Bessborough who appeared to be incapable of implementing appropriate standards of care; they were forced to wait until the congregation appointed her successor (see Chapter 18). In the 1960s the closing of Sean Ross as a mother and baby home and its transformation into a much-needed home for children with intellectual disabilities was delayed by a number of years because of the opposition of the bishop of Killaloe and the need to wait for the appointment of his successor who immediately agreed to these changes (see Chapter 19).

- 9.26 Religion played a central role in the lives of Irish people. Attendance at Sunday mass and other religious duties was almost universal and many Catholics participated in additional religious observances, such as religious retreats, sodalities, or daily mass during the penitential season of lent. There appears to have been little difference in religious devotion between rich and poor, young and old, male and female, rural and urban, and this gave the Irish Catholic church an unrivalled position of authority. The authority of the Catholic church undoubtedly increased after 1922. In 1911 Catholics constituted 74% of the population of Ireland; in 1926 they constituted almost 93% of the population of the Irish Free State.
- 9.27 Marriage, social life and often employment were influenced by religion. There was widespread opposition within both Catholic and Protestant families to inter-church marriages and the stories of unmarried mothers told in Chapters 8 and 12 suggest that some Irish children were born out of wedlock because of family opposition to religiously-mixed marriages. Instances of such opposition can be found in the 1980s. Schools were segregated on the basis of religion. Social life, including sports activities, drama groups, social outings and dances were often organised around the parish - both Catholic and Protestant. The segregation of religion and social life by religious denomination was designed to prevent inter-church marriages. The Adoption Act required children to be adopted into the same religion as the birth mother.
- 9.28 What role did the Catholic church play in influencing Irish attitudes towards 'illegitimacy'? J H Whyte suggested that there was 'a tradition of independence of clerical guidance on some issues'; many Irish people defied the Catholic church's condemnation of agrarian crime, support for Parnell despite his divorce, and

involvement in secret republican organisations.³⁵ K H Connell has argued that the Irish clergy, who were commonly the sons of modestly-comfortable Irish families - middling/strong farmers, small town businessmen, reflected and reinforced the values of those families in their sermons and general attitudes. The Catholic church and indeed most churches at this time condemned sexual relations outside marriage but in Ireland, Catholic church teaching may have been given additional weight by the social patterns of late marriage and matchmaking which put a high premium on preventing premarital pregnancies, or inappropriate contact between young people.³⁶ Guinnane claims that 'Connell viewed Catholicism primarily as something that helped young people to reconcile themselves to a life that was necessitated by other forces'.³⁷ One factor that secured the high status and wide acceptance of the Irish Catholic church was the degree to which it reflected the society from which it came and the church's support for key causes - such as national independence, or the importance of prudent marriages that protected a family's property and good standing. According to Guinnane 'few academic historians credit the Church with any ability to influence the demographic behaviour of Irish Catholics' and his comment takes account of the strictures of Catholic clergy against inappropriate social contact between young men and women.³⁸ Joe Lee, writing about Ireland in the late-nineteenth century commented that 'The Churches, however merely reflected the dominant economic values of post famine rural society'.³⁹ Sklar noted that 'the Church's position was influential in part because illegitimacy endangered the realization of social and material ambitions',⁴⁰ such as prudent marriage brokered by a matchmaker. These scholars suggest that the Catholic church did not independently determine Irish attitudes on sexual matters; it was influential because the attitudes that churchmen expressed and their strictures against early sexual adventures, and premarital sex, reinforced a set of values that met the needs of Ireland's conservative, agrarian society. 'Illegitimacy' was deplored by most Irish families because it damaged the family's standing and threatened the basic social fabric. Anybody who challenged the conventional attitudes towards extra-marital pregnancy would have faced the

³⁵ J.H. Whyte, *Church & state in modern Ireland 1923-1979* (second edition, Dublin, 1980), pp 8-12.

³⁶ K.H. Connell, *Irish peasant society: four historical essays* (Oxford, 1968); 'Catholicism and marriage in the century after the famine', pp 113-161.

³⁷ Timothy Guinnane, *The vanishing Irish. Households, migration, and the rural economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton, 1997), p. 218.

³⁸ Guinnane, *The vanishing Irish*, p. 74.

³⁹ Joseph Lee, *The modernisation of Irish society, 1948-1918* (Dublin, 1973), p. 5.

⁴⁰ Sklar, 'Marriage and nonmarital fertility', p. 363.

condemnation of the Catholic church, whether this condemnation was meted out in private, or in public.

- 9.29 The foundation of the Irish Free State, with an overwhelmingly Catholic population, was seen by some Catholic churchmen and zealous lay people as an opportunity to create a modern Catholic state, introducing laws and practices that were consistent with Catholic teaching, not just on sexual morality, but on a wide range of social issues. In 1932, around the time of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, the English Jesuit periodical *The Month* wrote two editorials about Ireland. An editorial in January 1932 titled, 'Ireland's Year', emphasised that 1932 marked the tenth anniversary of the Irish Free State, and the year of the Eucharistic Congress. It claimed that 'the one interest is to see how a nation ninety-three percent Catholic has succeeded in embodying in its Government and its political conduct the principles of Christian civil, social and industrial life as taught by the Catholic Church'. It asked 'whether the country is resolutely determined to recover its full Catholic heritage, whether those who through education, station or office, are the leaders of the people know in what directions they should lead, and are making reasonable progress. Never before in the world's history has there been a people so united in their Catholic belief'. Their verdict was that the Irish Free State should 'try harder' to achieve a truly Catholic state and society:

Much remained to be done before the Saorstat can claim to represent, as it ought the political mind of a Catholic people - much in the way of suppressing excessive gambling, of purifying stage and cinema, of banning the propaganda of birth-prevents, of thoroughly Catholicizing its University education, and, in the economic sphere, of developing Irish industries and agriculture...The conclusion is that it will be an uphill struggle to create a truly Catholic state.⁴¹

- 9.30 In August, after the success of the Eucharistic Congress, *The Month* returned to this theme,

Does that mean that in Ireland there may ultimately emerge a wholly Catholic government one whose policy will always be in harmony with the moral law and whose legislation will never, even indirectly, make the practice of the Faith more difficult.⁴²

⁴¹ *The Month*, Jan. 1932.

⁴² *The Month*, Aug. 1932.

9.31 This determination to enact legislation that would sustain the values of a Catholic society was most evident in relation to sexual and moral matters. In the first decade after independence, the Irish Free State passed laws to regulate access to alcohol, impose restrictions on dances and measures to implement the censorship of films and printed material. These campaigns were driven by a Catholic Action movement that saw the new independent Irish state as a sympathetic instrument for such legislation.⁴³ Concerns about sexual permissiveness were at the heart of this wider moral panic; dance halls, motor cars, cinemas and evil literature were all seen as promoting a receptive attitude towards birth control which was linked with rising 'illegitimacy'. The decision in 1930 of the Anglican Church (of which the Church of Ireland was a member) to withdraw its opposition to contraception for married couples appears to have prompted Pope Pius XI to write an encyclical on Christian Marriage - *Casti Connubii* - which was published on 31 December 1930. The encyclical reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage; the importance of conjugal chastity; hostility to contraception and abortion, and the submission of a wife to her husband. It made a brief reference to 'illegitimacy' in one of the final paragraphs:

We are sorry to note that not infrequently nowadays it happens that through a certain inversion of the true order of things, ready and bountiful assistance is provided for the unmarried mother and her illegitimate offspring (who, of course must be helped in order to avoid a greater evil), which is denied to legitimate mothers or given sparingly or almost grudgingly.⁴⁴

9.32 The publication of *Casti Connubii* on New Year's Eve 1930 almost certainly accounts for the fact that Catholic teaching on sexual morality dominated the content of the 1931 Lenten pastorals issued by Irish bishops. David Fitzpatrick noted that

Of the twenty-six episcopal pastorals, twelve reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage or inadmissibility of divorce: eleven deplored the insidious effects of the press, wireless or evil literature; eight inveighed against the cinema or theatre; six warned of the dangers of dancing; four alluded delicately to contraception, abortion or infanticide; three condemned company-keeping;

⁴³ Maurice Curtis, *The splendid cause: the Catholic Action movement in Ireland in the twentieth century* (Dublin, 2008), pp 113-54.

⁴⁴ *Casti Connubii*, para. 122.

while irregular unions and immodesty in female dress each provoked two admonitions.⁴⁵

- 9.33 This ideal of legislation and social policy that was 'in harmony' with Catholic teaching was shared by many Irish people, including politicians and public servants. Most politicians and senior public servants in national and local government were Catholic and a substantial number were devout Catholics whose religious practice extended to active involvement in organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, confraternities, and the secretive Knights of St Columbanus. Many files seen by the Commission reflect an implicit, almost automatic assumption that public policy should be in line with the views of the Catholic hierarchy, or the religious sisters who were in charge of various institutions. Some accounts of Ireland in the early years after independence suggest that the Catholic church was imposing its views about sexual morality on the government and the wider society. It would be more accurate to suggest that a majority of politicians, officials, citizens and male and female religious, shared a common set of views on a wide range of moral issues, and many of these views were also shared by the Protestant community. The enforcement of censorship of books and periodicals was assisted by dedicated postal officials and customs officers who opened packages and travellers' suitcases confiscating material that they deemed inappropriate. Many books that were subsequently banned were available for a short time in Dublin bookshops or the shelves of public libraries until a zealous member of the public reported them to the censor, having identified the offensive passages.
- 9.34 The *Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935* prohibiting the sale, manufacture and distribution of contraceptives, and literature that provided information or instruction on contraception, was arguably the legislation that came closest to enforcing Catholic moral teaching. There were laws against contraception in many other countries at this time, but it was not uncommon for condoms to be available, ostensibly for public health reasons - to prevent venereal disease. No country complied with Catholic teaching on birth control in as dedicated a fashion as Ireland. The late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth century were a time of falling fertility within marriage throughout much of the western world. Couples appear to have made serious efforts to limit family size, and while Catholic couples were less

⁴⁵ David Fitzpatrick, *The two Irelands, 1912-1939* (Oxford, 1998), p. 228.

dedicated to this than Protestant couples, they were not exempt. The fall in family size in Ireland was much less than in other parts of Europe and North America, with the result that by 1961, despite the late average age of marriage, Irish Catholic couples had among the highest levels of marital fertility in the developed world.⁴⁶ This was consistent with Catholic teaching promoting the merits of large families. Lack of access to contraception or an awareness of the possibilities of family planning served to perpetuate Ireland's large families.

9.35 The church/state consensus on this matter is evident in the report of the Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, which sat from 1948-54. It stated that the decline in family size was 'unwelcome and every effort should be made to arrest it'. Without citing any supporting evidence, the commission stated that large families were only a burden for a relatively short time; there was no evidence that large families 'makes for a general condition of poverty'; or that 'our family pattern imposes an undue strain on mothers in general', or that 'apart from the increased risk associated with more frequent child-bearing' that they had an adverse effect on the health of mothers; the number of families with a large number of dependent children - defined as ten or more - was 'relatively few'. The chapter titled Population Policy faithfully and unquestioningly repeated Catholic social teaching 'The primary purpose of marriage, in the natural order of things, is the birth and bringing up of children. The principle which rightly guides the normal Christian married couple in this matter is to have as many children as they can reasonably hope to bring up properly'.⁴⁷ The Irish clergy, in contrast to their counterparts in other countries, were not in favour of Irish couples learning about the 'rhythm method' of family planning, despite the fact that in 195x Pope Pius XII had expressed his support for this method.⁴⁸

9.36 In 1960 Fr Barrett, director of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau wrote that Irish children grow up in an atmosphere where purity and chastity are revered. The purpose of marriage, its obligations and its indissolubility are all recognised. There is a healthy reverence for the God-given power to share in the procreation of the human race. Immoral influence by press, radio and cinema are minimised by state control operated to a high standard of public

⁴⁶ Robert Kennedy, *The Irish. Emigration, marriage and fertility* (Berkeley, 1973), pp 173-205.

⁴⁷ Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, *Report 1948-54* (Dublin, 1954), para. 458.

⁴⁸ John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A history of its treatment by the Catholic theologians and canonists*, (Harvard, 1965), pp 445-6. William Conway, 'The recent papal allocution: the ends of marriage', *Irish theological quarterly*, 19, (1952), pp 75-9.

morals. (The prevailing criticism is exemplified by the frequent criticism of English newspapers circulating in Ireland because of their low standards of morality - although the editions are special Irish editions differing radically from editions on sale in England). The Irish catholic thus grows up without significant exposure to the naturalistic theories of sex education which permeate the popular press in a country where the moral standards of the natives no longer reflect traditional Christian teachings. There is, indeed, in Ireland an extreme reticence, both in public media of communication and in private conversation, in relation to matters of sex.⁴⁹

- 9.37 Mary-Claire Prendergast, a psychiatric social worker at St Patrick's hospital in Dublin (a mental hospital) disagreed. She commented on the lack of sex education, and

the ill-defined but powerful influence of atmosphere, which in Ireland excludes the subject of marriage from family and school, discourages somewhat any meetings between boys and girls, at home or at school, or anywhere else; jeers at fellows suspect of being 'soft' about the women, and writes off as 'brazen hussy' any girl showing signs of liking for the boys. The men have been heavily condemned for their marriage shyness, but they are only products of this extraordinary system, one would almost say conspiracy, which no more helped a boy mature into a man than it helped a girl mature into a woman...

...the same soul-destroying attitude would again be apparent when the young woman would be expecting a child, and all she had been taught - or not taught - would make her half ashamed of the fact. She would regard it as slightly indecent to be seen in public; her efforts would be geared towards concealing the news as long as possible.

...Somewhere in our growing up we should learn the biological facts of reproduction and it is too sadly common in Ireland to find adults who just never did.⁵⁰

- 9.38 Evidence given by witnesses to this Commission and further evidence from the archival records suggests that a number of women, who became pregnant outside marriage, were ignorant about the process of sexual reproduction.

⁴⁹ Dublin Diocesan Archives, AB8/b/XIX. Comments on First Draft of Report by Newman Demographic Survey on 'The religious arrangements for the integration of Irish Catholic immigrants in England and Wales'. This is published in A.E. C. W. Spenser, *Arrangement for the integration of Irish immigrants in England and Wales* (Dublin, 2012), p. 124.

⁵⁰ Mary Claire Prendergast, 'The family that isn't', *Christus Rex*, xiv, 2 (1960), p. 95.

- 9.39 Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland recognised the family ‘as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society’. The state guaranteed ‘to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order’, and to ‘guard with special care the institution of Marriage on which the Family is founded’. This constitutional protection given to the family based on marriage was copper-fastened by a constitutional prohibition of divorce. Under the constitution, the family and associated protection consisted of a married couple with or without children; it did not extend to a single woman and her child, or a cohabiting couple who were not married.
- 9.40 The struggle to protect Irish society from the evils of the modern world persisted into the late-twentieth century. Censorship laws were relaxed in the 1960s but the prohibition of divorce, contraception and abortion continued. The extent to which these restrictions succeeded in preserving Ireland as a living exemplar of Catholic moral teaching is open to question.
- 9.41 The existence within Ireland of unmarried mothers - even if the ‘illegitimacy’ rate was low by international standards - challenged the image of Ireland’s moral superiority, as did the number of pregnant single women who travelled to Britain. Between 1939 and 1942 the number of ‘illegitimate’ births registered increased from 1,761 (0.61 per 1,000) to 2,419 (0.82) and continued to rise, peaking in 1946 at 2,642 (0.9 per 1,000). Yet in contrast to the moral panic during the 1920s, this increase did not prompt a similar wave of Lenten pastorals and public denunciations. Luddy suggests that the increase was ‘due in no small part to the travel restrictions placed on Irish women during the war years’.⁵¹ PFIs (Pregnant from Ireland) were a regular topic of debate and dispute between British and Irish Catholic clergy and charitable organisations, and the Irish government but, with the exception of the Gaffney articles discussed earlier, the topic remained largely hidden from the public until the 1960s, though PFIs raised serious questions about the success or otherwise of the efforts by church and state to maintain stringent moral standards on Irish society.

⁵¹ Maria Luddy, ‘Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880-1973, *Women’s history review*, xx, 1 (2011), p. 143.

Providing for unmarried mothers: redemptive morality or social science

- 9.42 In the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century, institutions that were publicly-funded, such as the Irish or British workhouses, did not distinguish between unmarried mothers and other impoverished and needy women so unmarried mothers in a workhouse were not segregated or subjected to a distinct regime,⁵² though they tended to be viewed as 'undeserving' poor, in contrast to widows, who were regarded as meriting public support.⁵³ By the end of the nineteenth century however, there was a widely-held belief that the 'rescue' or 'rehabilitation' of unmarried mothers should be carried out within a strongly religious environment; prayer and penance were central to the process. Special facilities for unmarried mothers were provided by charities, not by the state. Mother and baby homes were seen as places where women could be redeemed and offered the opportunity to repent and do penance for their 'sin' by working and praying. Redemption and religious practice were seen an integral part of the care and 'rehabilitation' of unmarried mothers, by Protestant and Catholic charities alike. There is a considerable similarity between the practices and attitudes found in Protestant and Catholic mother and baby homes or charities that worked with the mothers and their children. Mother and baby homes in Scotland were run by charitable organisations with a strong religious/denominational ethos.⁵⁴ In the Netherlands, 'This association between a single mother and a sinful life, or even prostitution, has continued to be the basis of all care provided to single mothers and their children up to the 1960s'.⁵⁵ In the United States in the decades after World War II, two-thirds of the licensed maternity homes (the term used for mother and baby homes) were operated by religious charities.⁵⁶ In 1956 there were 397 beds in local authority mother and baby homes in Britain and 1,666 beds subsidised by local authorities in voluntary homes that were run by religious charities.⁵⁷

⁵² Sally Macintyre, *Single and pregnant* (London, 1977), p. 13.

⁵³ Margaret Jane Hillyard Little, 'No car, no radio, no liquor permit'. *The moral regulation of single mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* (Toronto, 1998), p. 27.

⁵⁴ Janet Greenlees, *Unmarried motherhood in Scotland during the twentieth century: Mother and Baby homes*. Reproduced in chapter 37

⁵⁵ Nelleke Bakker, *Mother and baby homes in the Netherlands in the 20th century* Reproduced in chapter 37

⁵⁶ Solinger, *Wake up little Susie*, pp 103-4.

⁵⁷ Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 107

- 9.43 A study of facilities for unmarried mothers in Toronto at the beginning of the twentieth century noted that 'Unwed mothers, along with other female sexual transgressors, were variously depicted as irresponsible, led astray, driven by lust for material goods, or thrill-seekers. Some were deemed prostitutes while other cases were blamed on the influence of "keepers of houses of ill fame", or by the "bad lot of Italians"'.⁵⁸ That statement might equally have been uttered about Ireland at the same time with the obvious exception of the comments about Italians. Leanne McCormick noted that those in charge of rescue homes in Northern Ireland presented the residents as corrupted innocents. The terms used to describe women in the homes, such as 'unfortunate creatures, unhappy sisters, fallen women, defiled, wreck', all convey a picture of victims who were in this position due to their ignorance and trustfulness, often having been betrayed by wicked men. They were portrayed as pathetic, aimless women, who wandered the streets like 'withered leaves driven in the wind', or drifted about like 'derelict vessels'. They had lost their sexual purity, and with it their sense of direction and purpose.⁵⁹
- 9.44 This moralising tone receded with the expansion in the number of professional social workers but many of the early social workers replaced moralising arguments with a belief that single mothers were somehow deviant - suffering from mental illness or of below-average intelligence. In the United States, according to Kunzel, "Feeble-mindedness," a diagnostic that enjoyed enormous popularity beginning in the 1910s, seemed to social workers to provide a useful explanation for out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She noted that 'In some ways, the conceptualization of unmarried mothers as feeble-minded overlapped with the evangelical understanding of them as victims of seduction'.⁶⁰ In 1917 it was claimed that only 14 of 138 unmarried mothers in Toronto General Hospital could be regarded as normal.⁶¹ At around this time a Canadian commission that investigated the care of the 'feeble-minded' and 'mentally defective' included unmarried mothers within its remit; it concluded that 'feeble-minded' women should be placed in institutions 'to prevent them from producing other feeble-minded citizens'.⁶²

⁵⁸ Karen Bridget Murray, 'Governing unwed mothers in Toronto at the turn of the twentieth century', *Canadian Historical Review*, lxxv, 2 (2004), p. 259.

⁵⁹ Leanne McCormick, *Regulating sexuality. Women in twentieth-century Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2009) p. 49.

⁶⁰ Regina Kunzel, *Fallen women, problem girls: unmarried mothers and the professionalization of social work, 1890-1945* (Newhaven, 1993), pp 52-3.

⁶¹ Murray, 'Governing unwed mothers', p. 260.

⁶² Little, 'No car', p. 6.

- 9.45 Eugenics is the belief that mankind can determine the characteristics of a population through selective breeding including reducing the capacity to have children among those who were deemed to be physically or mentally unfit. The Commission has received one allegation of eugenical practice but it has no reason to believe that it was ever practiced in Ireland not least because the concept was at variance with the teachings of the Catholic church. In the early-twentieth century a number of countries legalised the non-consensual sterilisation of women who were believed to be 'feeble-minded' or behaved immorally, including unmarried mothers. In 1927 the US Supreme Court ruled that the State of Virginia could carry out the eugenical sterilisation of a young woman who had become pregnant following rape and was deemed to be 'feeble-minded'.⁶³ In 1968 a total of 27 US states had compulsory sterilisation laws. 'The more recent application of eugenic legislation was punitive or economically motivated as in the case of women with illegitimate children supported by welfare payments'.⁶⁴ Sterilisation particularly targeted black single mothers who were receiving welfare payments.⁶⁵ In the aftermath of World War I, in order to protect society against 'a visible dissolution of sexual morals among women', the Danish authorities opened an institution on an island, close to Copenhagen, where 'slightly imbecile, erotic girls' were confined and sterilised.⁶⁶ It was widely believed throughout Scandinavia that 'the "degenerate" were more promiscuous, had more children and threatened social order'. In Switzerland, where compulsory sterilisations were carried out on the basis of agreements between local authorities and doctors, most sterilisations were carried out on 'unmarried, socially deprived women with children born out of wedlock who were categorised as "maladjusted", 'sexually promiscuous', 'mentally disabled' or 'feeble-minded'.⁶⁷
- 9.46 Spensky, writing about Britain noted that 'Until the Second World War, unmarried motherhood had been considered as being the result of the seduction of an overcredulous girl, who was particularly weak in character, ignorant or mentally

⁶³ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and power. A short history of reproductive politics in America* (New York, 2005), pp 93-94.

⁶⁴ Jean-Jacques Amy & Sam Rowlands, 'Legalised non-consensual sterilisation – eugenics put into practice before 1945 and the aftermath. Part 1: USA, Japan, Canada and Mexico', *European Journal of contraception & reproductive health care*, xxiii, 2 (2018), p. 124.

⁶⁵ Solinger, *Wake up little Susie*, pp 53-5.

⁶⁶ Brigit Kirkebæk, 'Sexuality as disability: the women on Sprogø and Danish society', *Scandinavian journal of disability research*, vii, 3-4 (2005), pp 194-205.

⁶⁷ Jean Jacques Amy & Sam Rowlands, 'Legalisation non-consensual sterilisation – eugenics put into practice before 1945, and the aftermath. Part 2: Europe', *European Journal of contraception & reproductive health care*, xxiii, 3, pp 194-200.

defective'.⁶⁸ In the aftermath of World War II, the explanation shifted somewhat from genetics to focus on social explanations; this has been described as 'The pathologisation of unmarried motherhood':

In this phase of social-scientific thinking bastardy was taken as a prime example of something which interrupted the proper functioning of social processes, and revealed a failure of social control, the control of individual behaviour by family and kin, by political and education authority, by all the influences which persuade most people to obey the established order. The conditions which were associated with high illegitimacy levels in any one locality tended to be thought of as pathological, and the individuals who engendered bastards as in some way victimized, disordered, even mentally abnormal.⁶⁹

- 9.47 John Bowlby, a leading authority of the time on early childhood development, stated that 'It is the opinion of many social workers with psychiatric knowledge and experience of this problem that, with many girls, becoming an unmarried mother is neurotic and not just accidental. In other cases the girls are chronically maladjusted or defective'.⁷⁰ However Bowlby distinguished between 'socially accepted' cases where an 'illegitimate' child might grow up with his/her mother and her parents, or with both parents in an irregular union, and the 'socially unacceptable' mother, with 'a neurotic character'.⁷¹
- 9.48 The argument that unmarried mothers were neurotic women who deliberately wished to become pregnant was expressed most vigorously by Leontine Young in her 1954 book *Out of Wedlock* which was widely-used in the education and training of social workers. She explored the reasons why single women became pregnant from a Freudian perspective and determined that 'everything points to the purposeful nature of the act' - i.e. a single woman became pregnant because of factors in her 'past life, her home and her childhood'; she was undergoing some form of 'pathological drama'.⁷² In the Netherlands, in the aftermath of the war, moralising arguments about unmarried mothers gave way to 'sociopathology',

⁶⁸ Martine Spensky, 'Producers of legitimacy. Homes for unmarried mothers in the 1950s', in Carol Mart (ed.), *Regulating womanhood. Historical essays on marriage, motherhood and sexuality* (London, 1992), p. 106.

⁶⁹ Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard M Smith (eds), *Bastardy and its comparative history: studies in the history of illegitimacy and marital nonconformism in Britain, France, Jamaica, and Japan* (Cambridge, 1980), pp 1-2.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Spensky, 'Producers of legitimacy', p. 108.

⁷¹ Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 93.

⁷² Leontine Young, *Out of wedlock* (McGraw Hill, 1954), chapter 2 'Why does it happen?' pp 21-39. The copy in UCD Library has a date stamp for 1970, which is the year when it was bought.

where unmarried motherhood was viewed as ‘part of a larger and alarming social problem’, and unmarried mothers were now cared for by ‘a multidisciplinary team with a psychologist, a social worker, a clergyman, a judicial advisor and a social psychiatrist as head of the team’.⁷³

Attitudes in Ireland

- 9.49 The records of the mother and baby homes and government files almost always describe unmarried mothers as ‘girls’. This terminology was common in Ireland and internationally.⁷⁴ Luddy stated that referring to ‘girl’ suggested that ‘Young women [in 1920s Ireland] were represented simultaneously as adults and as children’.⁷⁵ The 1907 Vice-Regal Commission used the term ‘girl-mothers’.
- 9.50 Some echoes of the ideas summarised above can be detected in Ireland. A former guardian of the Dublin Union submitted a statement to the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor (she also gave evidence in person), claiming, apparently based on her experience in the Dublin Union that:
- We are firmly convinced by what we have seen ourselves, that many of these girls and women are not normal. We would have every unmarried mother who seeks admission to a Maternity Home under the Local Authority examined by a mental specialist with a view to deciding whether or not after the birth of the child she is a fit person to take up again normal life or should she be subject to special care and control.⁷⁶
- 9.51 Sir Joseph Glynn, who was involved with a number of Catholic charities, claimed that a single woman who fled to Dublin in order to prevent her pregnancy becoming known in her neighbourhood was only ‘burying her head in the sand’; it would be common knowledge. He suggested that many of these women were often ‘more sinned against than sinning’. However on another occasion he implied that they were ‘weak-willed’ if not ‘abnormal’.⁷⁷

⁷³ Bakker, *Mother and baby homes in the Netherlands*, p. 8.

⁷⁴ This may reflect a common practice of restricting the designation ‘woman’ to women who were married or had been married. One definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary refers to ‘a female who has reached adulthood...a female person who is considered mature. Frequently contrasted with girl’.

⁷⁵ Luddy, ‘Moral rescue and unmarried mothers in Ireland in the 1920s’, *Women’s Studies*, xxx (2001), p. 812. She suggests that ‘they were not deemed to be in need of protection’.

⁷⁶ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, twenty-fifth day, 21 Jan. 1926.

⁷⁷ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, fourth day, 11 June 1925; sixth day, 24 June 1925.

- 9.52 When Fr Richard Devane, a Jesuit priest who was a prominent commentator on social issues, was giving evidence to the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor, a member of the commission referred to the fact that some countries sterilised unmarried mothers to prevent further pregnancies. Fr Devane suggested that the same ends could be achieved 'by depriving them of their liberty'. He was presumably thinking of the Magdalen Asylums. Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney, a DLGPH inspector, asserted that 'the unmarried mother is not normal'; she claimed to be speaking from personal experience. 'The very shock of finding that is she is going to be a mother affects the child. That is a big handicap to begin with'; she suggested that many children suffered long-term damage as a consequence.⁷⁸ She wrote about this topic in a number of annual reports of the DLGPH:

Many unmarried mothers have come to me for help, or in other necessity, and I would like to point out how sorely needed some work is for them. This is specially so when they have to make their own way. Usually it is difficult to know what plans will succeed with them. They agree regularly enough to fall in with ordinary healthy conditions of life; but often they run away from the smallest effort. To get any of the younger cases to face of their own choice anything they do not like to do will not usually succeed; with the older it is always useless. If we had guidance as to the history of each - family history, home conditions, motives of interest, employment, mental conditions - possibly much would be explained, now condemned wholesale as due to the girls own choice, and it would be found, I believe, that often they need personal service and individual handling. It is not enough, in my experience, to understand these mothers as 'total personalities' in the 'total situation' of unmarried mothers. Each wants straightening out singly.⁷⁹

- 9.53 On another occasion she commented on mothers of more than one 'illegitimate' child, women:

mostly older women, loving their children, perhaps, but perfectly indifferent about their own methods of life. These unfortunates regard their falls (for they are usually more than one) as unimportant. They have placed, perhaps, several illegitimate children in Industrial Schools or other places and are only waiting now until the latest child is old enough to be committed also. These women invariably take it as a right that well paid places should be found for

⁷⁸ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, ninth day, 15 July 1925.

⁷⁹ DLGPH, Annual report, 1932/3, p. 298.

them. Frequently it happens that little or nothing can be believed of what they say.

She claimed that first time unmarried mothers tend 'to develop into the other'.⁸⁰

- 9.54 Alice Litster, an inspector of boarded-out children, reported that in several cases in the past year she had come across boarded-out children who 'are well looked after yet are without interest in school-work and are unresponsive to any stimulus and dismissed by their teachers as unteachable':

In these cases I have had to fall back for explanation upon that factor which I have possibly been too much inclined to disregard except as it manifests itself in pre-disposition to disease - heredity. The mothers of these children are, without exception, of a class frequently found in our Co. Homes, weak-minded, not mental defectives, but almost on the border-line of mental defect, and completely lacking in moral stamina...It is difficult to know how to deal with children of this type; they are apparently amoral; they are not amenable to kindness or discipline; they are almost inevitable delinquents.

- 9.55 She went on to comment in greater detail on the unmarried mothers in county homes:

This type will present a problem even when, as we hope, special institutions are set up to deal with the unmarried mother. County Boards of Health and Public Assistance generally have dealt fairly and leniently with unmarried mothers with their first child, affording them the opportunity of rehabilitation by placing their children at nurse, and allowing them to leave the County Home to take up employment. In dealing with the class of women I have previously spoken of, the matrons of many of our County Homes are very strongly against affording any such facilities, and even where the women concerned have expressed their intention of taking out their children and maintaining them outside, have placed every obstacle in the way of discharge. It is practically certain that a woman of this type, allowed to leave the County Home, will return again in a short time. They are of weak intellect and completely lacking in moral fibre. If their children are placed at nurse, there is no obligation upon them to remain in the County Home and, indeed, no authority for maintaining them there, and they are invariably eager for the freedom of the outside world. A grave wrong is done to their children by

⁸⁰ DLGPH, Annual report, 1933/4, p. 325.

retaining them in the County Homes, but retention of the children is the only means of securing their mothers from the danger which freedom spells to them. It is a question also whether a graver social wrong is not committed by allowing these women their freedom since freedom to them will undoubtedly mean the birth of another child whose chances of average health and intelligence are small. I have no solution to offer except one which is repugnant to me, that is, the power of detention in special cases, which would allow of boarding-out the children and at the same time keeping their mothers under control and discipline.⁸¹

Factors promoting unmarried motherhood

- 9.56 In the first two decades after independence, according to Susannah Riordan: successive Irish governments came under pressure from an alliance of feminist, religious and social work organizations to introduce legislation that would give greater protection to children, girls and women from sexual exploitation...while campaigners had little sympathy with older women who were deemed to have embraced a life of immorality - the mothers of more than one illegitimate child, married women who became pregnant by men other than their husbands and women who were sometimes called 'deliberate prostitutes' - they sought to establish the fundamental innocence, victimhood and amenability to moral reclamation of the sexually-compromised adolescent. Their preferred narrative was one of seduction and betrayal, in which a girl, often a domestic servant, was impregnated by an older and more powerful man, perhaps her employer.⁸²
- 9.57 James Smith noted that Fr Devane was 'unique among his religious brethren who appeared before the [Carrigan] committee', because he referred to "the dual standard of morality accepted in this country, *as in perhaps no other*, where the woman is always hounded down and the man dealt with leniently".⁸³
- 9.58 The belief that unmarried mothers were 'weak-willed' or 'feeble-minded' complemented the argument that the more lax nature of modern social life was a major factor in the rise in 'illegitimate' births. The stereotype of the

⁸¹ DLGPH, Annual report, 1931/2, p. 293.

⁸² Susannah Riordan, "'Storm and stress': Richard Devane, adolescent psychology and the politics of protective legislation 1922-1935", in Catherine Cox & Susannah Riordan (eds), *Adolescence in modern Irish history*, (London, 2015), p. 129.

⁸³ James M Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen laundries and the nation's architecture of containment*, (Notre Dame, 2007), pp 10-11.

innocent/ignorant trusting young women who were preyed upon by men was dominant. Dance halls were places where

young and unsuspecting girls are placed in great danger. They meet in these places young men of whose character and antecedents they know nothing. They leave the halls with them without supervision and without protection. Commercial dance halls are the hunting grounds for a certain type of man who wants more than dancing and invites the young lady out just for an innocent drink or a drive in his car.⁸⁴

- 9.59 Such arguments featured in Lenten pastorals and church sermons, though it is important not to distort the picture. Sermons were delivered on these topics, but they were not weekly events, and references to unmarried motherhood were brief and indirect, not least because the congregation at Sunday masses included children and teenagers who should not be exposed to such concepts. It is probable that more explicit sermons were delivered at parish missions - where the attendance was confined to adults and there were separate missions for women and men. In 1938, Dr Michael Browne, Bishop of Galway, stated that:

No one who is aware of the facts can deny that late dances and especially the commercialised dance hall are a source of danger and of harm to young people. The Catholic clergy are aware of it because when the harm occurs, when shame and disgrace are brought on young people and on their families, it is to the clergy that they come with their complaints and sorrow. We see the wreckage.

- 9.60 He referred to the cost of maintaining unmarried mothers in public institutions and complaints by English Catholic charities about 'the number of young women who come to them from this country to hide their shame'.⁸⁵

- 9.61 The link between modern dance halls and 'illegitimacy' featured in comments by local and national officials. In the annual report of the DLGPH for 1933/4 Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney pontificated that

The causes leading to these lapses from virtue are perfectly evident to all who trouble to observe life around them: no parental control, cheap romantic fiction, cinematograph performances showing vivid scenes often of low vices under an attractive semblance, all night dances in halls or dance places

⁸⁴ *Connacht Tribune*, 8 Oct. 1938.

⁸⁵ *Connacht Tribune*, 8 Oct. 1938.

conducted without supervision, harmful and dangerous friendships, not to speak of other occasions too well known to need particular mention...In truth, the fact is that we have no cause for surprise if the young and inexperienced fall an easy prey to the terrible temptations with which their path is strewn. It is hard to see how the young can be saved from these dangers, while those of mature experience, their parents, do practically nothing to help them. Too often they only throw up their hands in helplessness at the first encounter with a wilful child who sets out to defy them. It is the parent who holds both responsibility and authority and no plea of an emancipated age, or headstrong disobedience on the part of the children, frees them from the traditional obligation of parenthood. They cannot lay duty aside because they find it uncongenial.⁸⁶

- 9.62 In 1932 the secretary of the Galway Homes and Home Assistance Committee expressed the hope that the supervision of dance halls would reduce the numbers admitted to the Tuam home 'considerably'.⁸⁷ Limerick county council debated a motion that would require every dance hall to appoint a local supervisory committee of 'responsible persons' - approved by the parish priest. The proposer claimed that dance halls 'have been a serious cause of the increasing laxness of morals in recent years and an important factor in a problem was that of unmarried mothers - which is causing anxiety to all serious minded citizens, and adding unduly to the rates already an almost intolerable burden'.⁸⁸ In 1939 a Redemptorist priest, who was giving a mission in Westport, stated that modern dance halls were 'more responsible than any other evil for filling up the County Homes of the country with unmarried mothers'.⁸⁹ Rev. H.V. Gill, delivered a sermon on 'The Home and the Regeneration of Society', one in a series of Lenten sermons given in Limerick in 1935. He quoted from the encyclical *Casti Connubii* about the 'bountiful assistance' given to unmarried mothers 'and her illegitimate offspring' (see 9.31). He claimed that 'the Catholic Church is called narrow-minded and out-of-date because she absolutely condemns such practices'.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ DLGPH, Annual report, 1933/34.

⁸⁷ *Connacht Tribune*, 16 April 1932.

⁸⁸ *Limerick Leader*, 26 Aug. 1935.

⁸⁹ *Connacht Tribune*, 4 Nov. 1939.

⁹⁰ *Limerick Leader*, 30 Mar. 1935.

Denunciation

- 9.63 A number of witnesses to this Commission, who were relatives of women who gave birth in mother and baby homes, have claimed that the parish priest demanded that she leave the parish, or called out her name from the altar. The Commission has discovered some limited contemporary evidence regarding this practice. In 1927 a member of the county Galway Hospital and Dispensary Committee, which was discussing the case of two sisters who were allegedly pregnant by the same man, commented that ‘there was a time in Ireland when a parish priest would denounce the scandal from the altar and the culprit would be forced to leave’. In this instance it would appear that the ‘culprit’ who should be denounced was the putative father. A meeting of Galway Hospital and Home Committee passed a resolution:

That considering the prevalence of sexual immorality, as evidenced by the number of illegitimate births in the maternity hospital attached to the Central Hospital, this Committee deplores the departure of the old Gaelic tradition of purity, caused in our opinion, by the lessening of parental control and want of supervision on the occasion of dances and other such entertainments; and we most respectfully suggest to the members of the Hierarchy in this county to appeal through the clergy to the people for a return to the old Gaelic customs under which such scandals were practically unknown.⁹¹

- 9.64 ‘Old Gaelic customs’ presumably included denouncing unmarried mothers from the altar. A history of the Archbishops of Tuam records a minute of a 1934 conference which instructed that

Whenever an illegitimate birth occurs in a parish, and is publicly known, the scandal ought to be denounced without mentioning names, with a view to calling the guilty to repentance and as a deterrent to others. The denunciation ought to be in sorrow more than in anger and the preacher ought to point to the scandal as:

A grave sin against the sacrament of matrimony and against the sixth commandment,
A degradation to the family,
As a disgrace to the family,
As a sin against the good name of the locality

⁹¹ *Connacht Tribune*, 18 June 1927.

Not only is the general permission given, but a direction is also given to make this denunciation. In a special case after consultation with His Grace the Archbishop, the matter may be deferred for a time. But in every case the scandal is to be immediately referred to the Archbishop.⁹²

- 9.65 In February 1935, the parish priest of Westport wrote to the Archbishop of Tuam.
- I have the very unpleasant duty to report to His Grace the Archbishop that an illegitimate child was born to a girl named [full name was given] in this parish, living about three miles from here. The child lived only a few days and was not brought to the church for baptism. It was given lay baptism. The guards exhumed the body and the medical evidence showed it died from natural causes.

A denunciation will take place on Sunday next. I am told the alleged father denies guilt in the matter.⁹³

- 9.66 The Tuam Diocesan Archives contain a letter in 1936 from the parish priest of Cornadulla, reporting that the reading of a letter 'had a profound effect on the congregation'. This letter is filed under 'scandal in the parish'. Two other letters survive from parish priests reporting the birth of an 'illegitimate' child in their parish - one names the putative father, but noted that he denied paternity.⁹⁴ Waldron's history of the Archbishops of Tuam states that the practice of reading such a letter 'remained in common use until the 1950s and, of course, was a cause of great pain, not just to the two persons directly concerned but to the wider families of both parties'.⁹⁵

- 9.67 In 1969 *Woman's Choice Weekly* published an interview with an unmarried father, whose child was born around 1961. He related how the local priest 'gave a disgusting sermon' at mass about an extra-marital pregnancy in the community. This man was present with his parents

with my face blushing right down to my collar. I owned up to being the father and immediately the whole town was ready to lynch me. The parish priest called round my house to see me. By this time my parents had told me to get out, so I was in the middle of packing a suitcase when he came around. He

⁹² Kieran Waldron, *The archbishops of Tuam, 1700-2000* (Galway, 2008), p. 119.

⁹³ Tuam Diocesan Archives, P/2/6-4: Scandal Westport Parish.

⁹⁴ Tuam Diocesan Archives, P25/7/6-1: Scandal in the Parish; P39/7/4: Miscellaneous General Administration Kilmeena; P54/7/9-1: Scandal in the Parish; P27/4/36.

⁹⁵ Waldron, *The archbishops of Tuam*, p. 120.

went on and on about the poor girl I had defiled and I knew right well that the minute he saw her he would call her a whore and a disgrace to her sex.

- 9.68 This man claimed that following the birth, his child was placed in an orphanage and the woman was sent to the 'infamous' Magdalen Home in Galway.⁹⁶ In 1993 when it became known that Bishop Eamon Casey had fathered a son, a man wrote to the *Sunday Independent*, giving his name and address: 'I remember sitting at Mass in a country church in the early 1950s, when a single pregnant girl in the adjoining pew was "read off the altar" to a hushed congregation and references to "the Devil visiting the parish" compounded the poor girl's agony'.⁹⁷
- 9.69 Despite these stories of public denunciation, most Catholic clergy preferred secrecy, as did Irish society, if only to protect a family's reputation. A letter from a parish priest in Cork to the Dublin archdiocese - a follow-up to a letter from a pregnant single woman - stated that she was 'from a respectable family that lives in the mountains. Brother is in a missionary order. She has managed to keep lapse a secret'. He emphasised that the pregnant woman was protecting her brother, the priest and her 'very worthy father' from shame.⁹⁸ In 1936 journalist Gertrude Gaffney claimed that Irish mother and baby homes were 'so guarded that no lay person, who is not concerned with them knows of their whereabouts',⁹⁹ and this is confirmed by letters and newspaper articles in the 1960s that are cited in Chapter 6.

Containment, segregation and classification

- 9.70 By the 1920s as Kunzel shows, responsibility for unmarried mothers in the United States was passing to professionally-trained social workers and similar trends can be seen in Britain. Ireland had few social workers, and most of those who were described as such had no formal training. So, responsibility for unmarried mothers, especially the younger first-time mothers, was left with what Riordan describes as 'socially-engaged middle-class women', a category that included the department's inspectors, religious sisters, the women who worked with Catholic and Protestant charities and as visitors for the Dublin Union. She suggests that witnesses to the Carrigan Committee, which was established to address concerns about sexual exploitation of adolescents, 'were keen to absolve the fallen girl from

⁹⁶ *Woman's Choice Weekly*, 23 Sept. 1969.

⁹⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 18 April 1993.

⁹⁸ Dublin Diocesan Archives, AB8/b/LII/C/100/4.

⁹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 15 Dec. 1936.

guilt. Responsibility lay rather with the predatory male and a society that maintained the sexual double standard'; their solution for these young 'fallen girls' was 'containment and religious discipline...because of a belief that the nun, like the social worker, had an intrinsic understanding of and sympathy for the "girl in trouble"'.¹⁰⁰

First-time mothers

- 9.71 The distinction between 'first offender', 'first fall' and the mothers of two or more 'illegitimate' children was well-established internationally and in Ireland by 1920. It is important, both as a reflection of attitudes and because it had a major influence on policy. This distinction is firmly embedded in the report of the 1907 Vice-Regal Commission, which recommended that all women 'on the occasion of their first lapse' before giving birth should be sent to a designated institution, owned or run by a religious community or philanthropic persons in the hope that she might be 'restored to the possibility of living a good and useful life'.¹⁰¹ One member of the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor divided unmarried mothers into the 'unfortunate class' - first-time mothers - and the 'incurable class'.¹⁰²
- 9.72 There was a degree of sympathy shown to women who were pregnant for the first time. Rattigan argues that most single women who were tried for infanticide in the Central Criminal Court between 1922 and 1950 'fitted the stereotype of the infanticidal woman as young, unmarried, seduced and abandoned, driven to infanticide by shame and desperation'.¹⁰³ Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney suggested that the existence of mother and baby homes had reduced the incidence of infanticide: 'A girl tortured by her sense of shame will take almost any step to keep hidden from the public the knowledge of her fall. The fact she can turn to one of these homes in her predicament, gives her a loop hole of escape'.¹⁰⁴ Criminologist Ian O'Donnell commented that 'all who killed infants received lenient treatment'. Most of those charged were the mothers of 'illegitimate' infants. Of those sent to trial approximately half were acquitted; most convictions were for manslaughter or concealment of birth; roughly half of those convicted received a short custodial

¹⁰⁰ Riordan, "Storm and stress", p. 144.

¹⁰¹ Poor Law Reform Commission, *Report of the vice-regal commission on poor law reform in Ireland, Volume I: 1906* (Cd 3202), paras, 168-9.

¹⁰² Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, first day, 27 May 1925.

¹⁰³ Rattigan, *What else could I do?* p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ DLGPH, Annual report, 1934/5.

sentence. He claimed that it was ‘surprising how few mothers who killed their babies were deemed to satisfy the legal definition of insanity’.¹⁰⁵

9.73 Juries recommended mercy in every one of these cases; the judge endorsed their recommendations in all but one case. O'Donnell suggests that the leniency shown to all those who killed infants ‘resulted from the perpetrators following the rules of an intolerant and stigmatizing society...What saved these murderers was not so much their gender or relationship with the victim, but an unspoken acknowledgement that their predicament was a result of society’s moral strictures and a low value placed on infant life’.¹⁰⁶ The ‘murderous mothers were pitied but understood’ and ‘The more reflective government members must have appreciated that these women’s conduct resulted from profound shame at their failure to live up to the social and sexual mores that were privileged by the new nation. By reacting as they did, they showed a deep awareness of what constituted acceptable conduct in the austere doctrinaire Ireland that was emerging and for this reason it would have been hypocritical - to say nothing of being disproportionately severe - to make them suffer further’.¹⁰⁷

9.74 Ferriter detected ‘a degree of charitable thinking, perhaps even sympathy towards unmarried mothers’ in a 1929 memorandum presented to Cabinet.

Many unfortunate unmarried mothers are denied the shelter of their own families and it is possible that some of them, who might otherwise reform drift into the prostitute class in a spirit of despair induced by the hardships they suffer.¹⁰⁸

9.75 The distinction between first-time mothers and those with two or more children centred on the belief that ‘first offenders’ could be rehabilitated by the regime in a mother and baby home, whereas there was much less certainty that mothers who had given birth to a second or subsequent child were capable of rehabilitation. The term ‘rehabilitation’ continued to be used for many decades in relation to unmarried mothers; it was even used in *Chains or Change* - the manifesto of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement.

¹⁰⁵ Ian O'Donnell, *Justice, mercy, and caprice. Clemency and the death penalty in Ireland* (Oxford, 2017), p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ O'Donnell, *Justice, mercy, and caprice*, pp 187-8.

¹⁰⁷ O'Donnell, *Justice, mercy, and caprice*, pp 193-4.

¹⁰⁸ Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of sin. Sex and society in modern Ireland* (London, 2010), p. 133, the quotation is from National Archives of Ireland, TSCH/ S5931: Illegitimate Children (Affiliation Orders).

9.76 In 1928 Fr Richard Devane, wrote that:

The Poor Law Commission¹⁰⁹ now proposes to group first offenders, or those amenable to reform, and to segregate the others, and deal with each case apart. The Commission is convinced that reformation must be based on religion, and gives the widest latitude to public bodies to deal with the problem accordingly. The Church has now a unique opportunity in this country for reclaiming these young girls, for the Commission practically suggests that they should be handed over to religious bodies to be dealt with, and reformed through 'individual charity and sympathy', based on religion...Here is an opportunity for nuns to exercise Christ-like charity towards their weak and unfortunate little sisters, to raise them up to virtue and self-respect, and save them from drifting further down the road to ruin. Little by little the poor are coming into their own...

... The Poor Law is being exorcised of the paganism in which it was originally conceived, and poverty in this Catholic land will, before long, be freed from the stigma of disgrace to which the destitute, forced to seek public relief, have been too long condemned. By this recommendation the unmarried mother who is amenable to reform may be boarded out in special institutions set up by the Church, and under the control of religious women, who will bring all the power of example and charity to bear on those young lives, and thus help to restore them again, as honourable members, to society and to the Church...It is further suggested that relief to unmarried mothers must have as a condition their being willing to agree to be detained, in case of a first offender for twelve months, of a second offender two years...These recommendations are conceived and put forward in a truly Christian spirit, and in them we see big possibilities for applying Christian principles to many different social problems with which we are encompassed on all sides and which have been passed on to us as an unfortunate legacy from those days when our people were denied any practical voice in the solution of such problems.¹¹⁰

This is an example of the determination to bring government policy into conformity with Catholic teaching.

9.77 It was widely recommended, internationally and in Ireland, that first-time single mothers should be segregated from mothers of two or more 'illegitimate' children.

¹⁰⁹ His term for the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor.

¹¹⁰ Richard Devane, *The unmarried mother and the Poor Law Commission: illegitimacy and allied problems a 100 years ago* (Dublin, 1928. Reprinted from the *Irish ecclesiastical record*, June 1928).

It was also suggested that a first-time mother should remain with her child and feed her child until the infant was approximately one year old. This was often viewed as an integral part of the woman's rehabilitation. Requiring a mother to care for her child at least until the infant was weaned, for perhaps a year, would give her a sense of maternal responsibility that would deter her from another pregnancy and perhaps encourage her to contribute to her child's upkeep. Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney expressed the opinion that:

if the children's mothers are available, they should not be separated from them until they are 2 years of age. If the mother is of unsuitable character she should be detained in the Home. If she can go and earn her daily bread in the world she should be encouraged to do so, but be influenced to keep in touch with her child, for all experience goes to prove that, if the affection for her offspring which nature has stepped in and exacted is kept alive through her contact with her baby during the nursing years she will keep straight for its sake more easily than for any other motive in life.¹¹¹

9.78 Miss Cruice of St Patrick's Guild did not believe that keeping mother and child together nurtured a maternal instinct. She claimed that 'At Pelletstown and in various country Unions they drop the children just like an old garment. They never want to see them again. The children become a burden to them that they drop them and there is no more about it'.¹¹² But her views would appear to have been the exception at this time.

9.79 It was widely believed that mothers who were permitted to abandon their child shortly after birth tended to become pregnant within a short period. Emily Buchanan, a member of the committee of the Nursery Rescue and Protestant Children's Aid Society, believed that it was essential that mother and child must be kept together for at least nine months

the girls cannot possibly look forward to the birth of the children with anything but the most dreadful feelings. If the child is taken away, as is commonly done, the girl cannot have learned to care about it. She knows she has to pay for it. That position must be most demoralising for the girls and the result is that they get reckless very often and fall a second time.¹¹³

¹¹¹ DLGPH, Annual report, 1931/2.

¹¹² Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, tenth day, 12 July 1925.

¹¹³ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, thirteenth day, 23 Sept. 1925.

- 9.80 According to the annual report of the Nursery Rescue and Protestant Children's Aid Society for 1931/2: 'Facing out into a world, which all know is full of temptation, [the mothers] are strengthened to resist it by the love of their children, the necessity of paying towards their maintenance, and the knowledge that the Committee take a real interest in them and are ready to advise them in their difficulties'.¹¹⁴ The annual report for the previous year stated that

The Committee are most anxious to impress on the Church [the Church of Ireland] the two-fold value of the work for which they are asking assistance. The care of her child is one of the most important levers in the reformation of the mother, the love and regard for it acting as a deterrent should temptation assail her. At the same time, it seems a very doubtfully desirable arrangement that she should retain the charge of it personally, especially if a girl. As the child grows up, and learns something of life, it is inevitable that either a very painful situation must arise, or that the daughter must think lightly of her mother's lapse, and therefore be herself more open to temptation. On the whole, the most beneficial system appears to be that adopted by this Society.¹¹⁵

- 9.81 The implication was that a mother should care for her child for some time in order to aid her rehabilitation but her child should then be brought up in a more respectable family. There is no indication that any thought was given to the emotional consequences for mother or child of having a mother care for her infant only for them to part when the child was one or two years old. The belief that caring for her child for a time should form part of an unmarried mother's rehabilitation was not unique to Ireland; it led to an insistence that mothers should remain in a mother and baby home for a minimum period after the birth.¹¹⁶ Nicholson described the idea that a mother should care for her infant before giving him/her up for adoption as 'ambiguous maternity'.¹¹⁷

- 9.82 Remaining in a mother and baby home for a specified period was deemed necessary to ensure that a woman underwent moral reform. Religion was an integral part of the process of moral reform, not just in Ireland. Nicholson's 1968 book records that the matrons held daily prayers in all except two of the English mother and baby homes and all the women were expected to attend church

¹¹⁴ The Nursery Rescue and Protestant Children's Aid Society, Twenty-third annual report, 1931/2 (Dublin, 1932).

¹¹⁵ The Nursery Rescue and Protestant Children's Aid Society, Twenty-first annual report, 1929/30 (Dublin, 1930).

¹¹⁶ Morton, *And sin no more*, p. 48.

¹¹⁷ Nicholson, *Mother and baby homes*, p. 115.

services on Sundays.¹¹⁸ Fr Devane told the Commission on the Sick and Destitute poor that all 'first-fall' mothers and some mothers of second children should be given every assistance to help them reform;

'every effort should be made within whatever system is devised to bring religion to bear on their lives in an intensive form'. As part of this process, every unmarried mother should be deeply impressed with sin, so that with the royal sinner, her sin should in the future be always before her. The merely natural shame and disgrace will soon pass away when the child is placed at nurse: the only real deterrent will be to bring the spiritual side of her fall before the girl, and impress her in no superficial way with the guilt of her sin, and leave her with an abiding memory and sorrow.

- 9.83 He recommended that unmarried mothers should undergo 'a few days of retreat in which, she and some others like her, should be gathered together, and made to think deeply on their sin, and to realise what a woman has done when she has lost her virtue and her honour'. He believed that this practice would prevent subsequent pregnancies.¹¹⁹ The chapters on the individual institutions record that women in Regina Coeli attended retreats; bible classes were among the religious activities in Denny House and a number of Bethany mothers underwent conversion. Prayer and regular attendance at mass and other religious services was part of the routine in the three homes run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.
- 9.84 There was a strong current of denominational competition among the charities that ran mother and baby homes and children's homes or placed children with foster parents or adoptive parents, and this was not confined to Ireland. Vulnerable women and their children were seen as potential targets for conversion and evangelisation. The greatest rivalry was between Catholics and Protestants.¹²⁰ In Ireland the primary motivation behind the establishment of St Patrick's Guild and the CPRSI was to prevent the children of Catholic unmarried mothers being raised as Protestants; the chapters on Bethany and Regina Coeli suggest that denominational competition persisted until at least the 1940s.

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, *Mother and baby homes*, p. 123.

¹¹⁹ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, twentieth day, 5 Nov. 1925.

¹²⁰ Morton, *And sin no more*, pp 37-39.

- 9.85 The Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary determined that some of the women admitted to Bessborough were more 'weak-willed' than others, and therefore needed to be kept in the home for longer 'to safeguard them against a second lapse'.¹²¹ Miss Fitzgerald-Kenney regarded the Bessborough regime as highly successful; she claimed that few former Bessborough mothers had been admitted to county homes to give birth to a second child, and 'of those who have fallen again the majority spent only a short period in the special home either because of the death of the first child or through the interference of their relatives'.¹²²
- 9.86 It was believed that it was essential to segregate first-time mothers, who were regarded as amenable to reform/rehabilitation, from women who had given birth to two or more 'illegitimate' children. The 1907 Vice-Regal Commission described the latter as the 'more depraved cases', 'multi-generations of illegitimacy found in workhouses'. They claimed that in one workhouse they were shown 'a baby, its mother, its grandmother and its great grandmother, or four illegitimate generations in the female line'. The Vice-Regal Commission claimed that such 'confirmed immorality' appeared to be 'a tendency in Irish workhouses' - though their commentary might suggest that society rather than the mother was responsible for this: an unmarried mother was often unable to return home 'owing to the sentiment of aversion from immorality which is too strong in most parts of the country to permit her to face that and to return with her baby to her relatives, even if they would receive her'.¹²³
- 9.87 Because first-time mothers were regarded as susceptible to influence, whether positively or negatively, it was deemed vital that they should not come into contact with unmarried mothers of two or more children. Jennie Wyse Power, a member of the board of Dublin Union, claimed that the religious sisters running Pelletstown told her that it took a considerable time to undo the adverse influence on young single mothers of spending time in the Dublin Union in the company of women who had several 'illegitimate' children.¹²⁴ The first report of the DLGPH covering the years 1922-25 described Bessborough as 'a home for the reception and reformation of...first offenders. The Sisters believe they can influence these cases

¹²¹ Cork Board of Public Assistance, Minutes, 26 Nov. 1930.

¹²² DLGPH, Annual report, 1934/5.

¹²³ Vice-regal Commission, Report, para 170.

¹²⁴ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, eighth day, 14 July 1925.

best by keeping them dissociated from those who have lapsed a second time or oftener'.¹²⁵ The DLGPH report for 1928/9 reiterated that Bessborough was 'intended primarily for young mothers who have fallen for the first time and who are likely to be influenced towards a useful and respectable life', going on to note that 'It is now generally accepted that the number of unmarried mothers in county homes should be diminished and that encouraging results can be anticipated if special provision is made to help them'. The same report suggested that 'By timely sympathetic help the mother, who is often friendless and inexperienced, can be protected from degrading influences and enabled to regain her footing in the world' and this would reduce the number of mothers given birth to subsequent 'illegitimate' children.¹²⁶

- 9.88 There was some debate about the appropriate treatment of mothers who had given birth to a second child outside marriage. A number of people, including Fr Richard Devane, believed that some of these mothers might be worthy of rescue/reform. Jennie Wyse Power, who had first-hand experience of the unmarried mothers in the Dublin Union and Pelletstown, claimed that there were 'some very good mothers in the second offenders', though she agreed that 'the persistent offenders' and their babies should be kept in an institution for longer than at present.¹²⁷
- 9.89 The regime that was suggested for mothers who had given birth to more than two children, (and some mothers of two) was often punitive; references to 'detain[ing]' mothers, perhaps as a punishment, but more commonly to protect society from further immorality and local taxpayers from the cost of additional children. It was widely alleged that mothers of two or more 'illegitimate' children suffered from mental illness or intellectual deficiencies, which they might transmit to their children.¹²⁸ Miss Cruice claimed that 'The other class of girl, the wanton girl, is mentally deficient. There is a slight mental deficiency in nearly every one of them'.¹²⁹ Fr Devane claimed that the problem of unmarried mothers with more than one child

cuts down the roots of the Poor Law System as she is in so many cases the prolific mother of degenerates; imbecility, insanity, venereal disease,

¹²⁵ DLGPH, Report, 1922-25.

¹²⁶ DLGPH, Annual report, 1928/9.

¹²⁷ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, eighth day, 14 July 1925

¹²⁸ Vice-Regal commission, Report, para. 220.

¹²⁹ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, tenth day, 12 July 1925.

blindness, in a word a physical and moral degeneracy can to a considerable extent be referred back to her as a source. Deal with the radical problem and you deal with all the others to a considerable extent.

9.90 He described the unmarried mother

who drifts back three, four, five times into the single nursery of the Workhouse, the women who are semi-imbeciles, or mentally deficient, who drift on to the streets or into the nurseries in workhouses, and especially those who have more than one child...These are not absolutely wicked but mentally weak and are simply a prey to everybody who wants to come their way...Their children come on the rates and it would be better to deal with them radically in some way. It is a big problem as there is a big principle involved, that of depriving the individual of liberty. But the individual is deprived of liberty in many ways, and in many cases, and it seems to me that something should be done with those people who drift on to the streets, who are continually drifting into the present workhouses, who are a burden on the rates, who are spreading diseases, creating degeneracy, blindness, insanity and everything else. Why should they be not taken up and hidden away for their own good and for the good of society? I think something in that way should be done and that such people should be committed to some central Home, or that the prostitute should be committed to a Good Shepherd Home. They are the mothers of those wasters that go backwards and forwards, like the case that came before the Vice-Regal Commission of a great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and child all being illegitimate and in the same workhouse at the same time.

The Vice regal Report on the Poor Law suggests that she should be regarded as an unfit guardian of the child and should be locked up while she is a burden on the rates. These mentally deficient women, whether ordinary single mothers or prostitutes, should be locked up for their own and the public good until they show sign of amending.¹³⁰

9.91 In 1935 the wife of a Church of Ireland rector wrote to the Irish Church Missions seeking a home for a woman who had recently given birth to her second child and was about to be discharged from Bethany. She described this woman as '[mentally] weak - quite soft, as people say, and is liable to get into trouble again

¹³⁰ Richard Devane, 'The legal position of the unmarried mother in the Irish Free State', *Irish ecclesiastical record*, xxiii (Jan-June 1924), pp 172-88.

and again'. Her local clergyman and his wife were determined that she should not return to her native parish, 'where she is only a beast of burden to her old mother and is at the mercy of any tramp who comes along'. This woman was 'not a mental case, but...quite unfit for work as a ward maid'. She was 'only fit for doing some farm work - on a farm where the people would understand her and care for her like they would a helpless animal'. The local bishop had suggested sending her to a Church Army Home [Salvation Army] in England - but they had declined to take her. The clergyman's wife asked whether anybody was needed to clean shoes and scrub at the Fold, a children's home.¹³¹

- 9.92 Miss Litster told the Commission on the Sick and Destitute poor that 'the old offenders', i.e. the mothers of several 'illegitimate' children, - who are 'always a charge on the rates' should be confined 'for a sufficiently long period to enable you to do something with them'. She would send mothers, who left the county home with their child and then sent the child to an industrial school, to a Magdalen institution. She believed that very many of these mothers were mentally ill.¹³² The secretary of DLGPH was opposed to letting unmarried mothers leave their children in order to go out to work, because that 'relieves the mother of her responsibility'.¹³³
- 9.93 Miss Litster is widely cited throughout the Commission's report and in almost all instances she emerges as an intelligent woman whose insights were far better informed than her peers. In 1931/2 her work was confined to boarded-out children; she would have had no first-hand experience of unmarried mothers. In this statement she is relating the views of matrons of county homes, who were invariably religious sisters. But the image is grim; it suggests that children were being detained in county homes, as quasi-hostages, to prevent their mothers being freed to embark on yet another extra-marital pregnancy.
- 9.94 The chairman of the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor distinguished between 'the woman or girl, who has fallen', and 'others who may be called continuous offenders'. One witness agreed that 'where a woman has fallen more than a couple of times - put whatever limit you like on the number of her falls -

¹³¹ Irish Church Missions, ICM/CF/0048. The Children's Fold was a children's home run by the Irish Church Missions.

¹³² Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, ninth day, 15 July 1925.

¹³³ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the relief of the sick and destitute poor, including the insane poor, minutes of evidence, first day, 27 May 1925.

cases of that kind may be treated as quasi-criminal'; he agreed with the chair that such women were 'a possible danger to the community', and that it would be advisable to keep them in an institution for a period of time.¹³⁴ The annual report of the DLGPH expressed the opinion that many mothers of more than one 'illegitimate' child 'appear to be feeble-minded and need supervision and guardianship'; some should be sent to Magdalen Asylums.¹³⁵ An exchange at the commission reveals that one member of the commission and the secretary of the DLGPH concurred that 'the second class, the incorrigible class, are [as] more akin to criminals than the unfortunate class'; the questioner expressed the opinion that these mothers should be deprived of their liberty, though the secretary of the DLGPH was more circumspect, suggesting that second-time mothers should be required to stay for a longer period in an institution than first-time mothers. Another witness wanted to discharge some 'very wicked' mothers of several 'illegitimate' children as soon as possible to prevent them having a bad influence on other mothers.¹³⁶

- 9.95 In 1933 Bishop Fogarty of Killaloe divided unmarried mothers into three categories: a large number who were 'feeble or weak-minded sort...never be able to take care of themselves...easy victims to the wicked'. He believed that they should be placed in institutions under the care of religious sisters though he claimed that no such institutions existed. A second category were 'naturally decent...who have fallen through accident or environment'. Sean Ross could deal with these 'girls'. The third class were 'women of a wild and vicious nature, who are a harmful influence wherever they prevail. They are neither amenable to religion outside, nor will they consent to abide permanently in religious institutions'; he noted that some of these women were admitted to homes run by the Good Shepherd Nuns (Magdalen Homes).¹³⁷ This distinction between first-time mothers and women who were pregnant for a second or subsequent time remained powerful in Ireland until the 1950s when Dunboyne was established as a mother and baby home for second-time mothers, though from an early stage it also admitted first-time mothers.

¹³⁴ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, fifth day, 23 June 1925.

¹³⁵ DLGPH, Annual report, 1931/2.

¹³⁶ Oireachtas Library, Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, minutes of evidence, first day, 25 May 1925; fourth day, 11 June 1925.

¹³⁷ *Nenagh Guardian*, 2 Dec. 1933.

Unmarried mothers in national and local politics

- 9.96 Unmarried mothers did not feature much in the debates in Dáil Éireann except in the context of legislation on matters such as extending eligibility for funding from the Irish Hospitals Trust to mother and baby homes; the *Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934*; the *Children Act 1934*, and the *Illegitimate Children (Affiliation Orders) Act 1930*. The 1930 Act was designed to make it easier for a single woman to secure support for her child from the alleged father. Earner-Byrne states that the Minister for Justice, James Fitzgerald Kenney, who introduced the legislation ‘presented a disturbingly misogynistic approach to welfare’, presenting the unmarried mother as ‘temptress and blackmailer’.¹³⁸ Replying to the minister, Fianna Fáil TD Dr Conn Ward stated that

I have had some opportunity of studying these people in the course of my professional work in institutions where these people are treated, and I want to say that it appears to me that the male section of the population will require some protection under the terms of the Bill. The vast majority of these mothers are more sinned against than sinning, we will all agree, but there is little doubt that some of them would use the powers conferred by this Bill for the purposes of blackmail...After the birth of the child the mother is an outcast to a certain extent, and she is in a desperate plight. Her disgrace has become public and her condition is such that it cannot become worse. People in such circumstances are liable to become the victims of unscrupulous schemers who have been known deliberately to select a victim.

- 9.97 He suggested that ‘in cases where it is possible, marriage is the best solution’.¹³⁹ Other speakers referred to the loss of reputation and financial ruin that a man who was named in court as a putative father would incur, and the dangers of malicious paternity claims. One senator categorised the women and men in such cases as the innocent girl who has been wronged; the girl who is well aware of what she is doing, but who made a mistake; the older woman who is alarmed at the poor prospect of matrimony, except by guile of some kind; the hopeless case...the girl who has had two or more children of which there is a considerable number, the dangerous woman, whom it is suggested, will make a living out of affiliation orders; and the blackmailer... the simple boy who is led astray by sexual instincts and is probably not as much to blame as the girl, the marauder, the man who goes from town to town

¹³⁸ Earner-Byrne, ‘Reinforcing the family’, p. 363.

¹³⁹ Dáil Debates, 30 Oct. 1929.

and leaves his mark; the innocent victim of blackmail, and finally, the selected one out of several sinners, who is selected because he has a long purse and is the most likely to be able to pay.¹⁴⁰

- 9.98 The number of statements about unmarried mothers and their children in the Oireachtas debates is limited, and similar views to the above were uttered in other legislatures in these years. The *Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934* was designed to reduce mortality among 'illegitimate' infants because of a belief that many of these children were born and died in poorly-run private maternity homes. The *Children Act* of the same year was also motivated by a wish to save the lives of 'illegitimate' children. During the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s there were several debates and many Parliamentary Questions tabled about children in industrial schools. There is a marked contrast between the intermittent interest shown in these children and the silence concerning mother and baby homes. It is also noteworthy that the questions and debates about children in industrial schools never referred to the fact that many of these children were 'illegitimate' or the reasons for their institutionalisation.
- 9.99 Most coverage in local or national media that refers, even in passing, to unmarried mothers related to reports of meetings of local health authorities, court reports concerning attachment orders against putative fathers, and prosecutions for concealment of a birth or child neglect. A word search of the *Cork Examiner* from 1920 to 1960 under key words 'unmarried mothers' and 'illegitimate' produced 28 stories relating to infanticide or the discovery of dead infants; six stories - all in the 1920s - relating to Bessborough, or the cost of unmarried mothers to the various public assistance authorities; five stories about adoption - all in the 1950s, one court report of a sexual assault and one report relating to the Illegitimate Children Affiliation Bill. This coverage is typical of Irish newspapers at this time. The local newspapers contain extensive information about boarded-out children and children at nurse: advertisements seeking foster homes, reports of prosecutions for failure to register children at nurse or inquests on foster children who had died. Such stories should have been known to any regular reader of local newspapers¹⁴¹ and their circulation and readership was extensive. But there is no reason to believe that these reports, which often contained graphic details of neglect, prompted

¹⁴⁰ Seanad Debates, 7 May 1930; The McGillicuddy of the Reeks.

¹⁴¹ There are many examples in local newspapers. *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 July 1932; *Nenagh Guardian*, 11 Dec. 1937; On concealment of a birth, *Nenagh Guardian*, 9 Oct. 1937.

anger or agitation over the mistreatment of the children or any reflections as to the circumstances of their birth.

- 9.100 There are more references to unmarried mothers in the years before 1942, because provision for unmarried mothers in mother and baby homes and county homes was the responsibility of the local health authority, and minutes of their meetings were commonly reported in the local press. After that date the key decisions were taken by the county manager and the managers' orders were not reported in the local newspapers. Local authorities continued to have occasional discussions about boarded out children but there is less material than in earlier years. The most common theme in debates at local authority meetings concerned the costs to ratepayers of maintaining unmarried mothers and their children.
- 9.101 A number of comments made by councillors or members of local authority committees are offensive. One member of the Galway Hospital and Dispensaries Committee, who was complaining about unmarried mothers giving birth in the Galway Central Hospital, because this deterred married women doing so, suggested that 'there should be a shed erected at the County Home', to cater for them. The chair of the committee, Canon McAlinden replied that these women were not 'hospital cases. They are coming in as refugees'.¹⁴² In the following year the Galway newspapers were asked to publish a denial of a rumour that 'coloured illegitimate' children had been born in the Central Hospital.¹⁴³ In 1931 the Galway Hospitals and Dispensary Committee reported that for the first time no unmarried mothers had been admitted to the Central Hospital during the previous month, presumably because births were now taking place in the Tuam Children's Home.¹⁴⁴ The resident medical supervisor of the Limerick County Hospital at Croom complained that unmarried mothers in Limerick city and county were sent to give birth at Croom. He claimed that 'both parties are a stigma to the institution. To me personally, all patients are the same, but I have reason to believe that a large number of married women are refusing to come here on account of what they consider as undesirable associates in the hospital'. The board of health decided not to admit unmarried mothers from Limerick city in future, allegedly because the hospital was overcrowded.¹⁴⁵ In 1931 Macroom Cottage Hospital refused to admit an unmarried mother who was in labour with twins despite the local midwife

¹⁴² *Connacht Tribune*, 8 Sept. 1928.

¹⁴³ *Connacht Tribune*, 8 Nov. 1928.

¹⁴⁴ *Connacht Tribune*, 14 Feb. 1931.

¹⁴⁵ *Limerick Leader*, 14 Aug. 1926.

determining that she was 'in a serious medical condition'. The dispensary doctor announced that she could not be moved and the woman gave birth to twins in Macroom Cottage Hospital, (assisted by the doctor). Within two hours of the birth of the first baby, and little more than an hour after the second delivery, mother and babies - each weighing approximately 3lbs. - were placed in an ambulance and transported to Bessborough; one baby died and one survived. The medical officer justified their speedy transfer by citing a recent circular stating that all first-time unmarried mothers should be sent to Bessborough; he claimed that he had no alternative 'from a moral and administrative point of view'. He expressed more concern for the well-being of the matron in the Cottage Hospital than the well-being of the mother. He claimed that: 'The general experience is that if you keep such cases until they are up and around they will not then go into such a home as Bessboro' but return home generally with harmful results to themselves and the child'.¹⁴⁶ In 2018, an RTÉ radio documentary told the story of Peggy McCarthy, an unmarried pregnant woman with intellectual disabilities who was refused admission to hospitals in Listowel and Tralee (both in Kerry) in 1946, and died from eclampsia.¹⁴⁷

- 9.102 There were reports in local newspapers that some residents in county homes were unwilling to associate with unmarried mothers. A member of the North Tipperary county council complained that poor people entering the county home had to mix with 'part lunatics and a lot of unmarried mothers'.¹⁴⁸ In 1929 a member of the Galway Home and Home Assistance Committee commented on a visit to the county home in Loughrea that 'at dinner time four girls were sitting at a table all by themselves' - they were pregnant single women. He suggested that advantage was often taken of their 'ignorance'; they were often 'more sinned against than sinning'.¹⁴⁹ In 1931, a member of Tipperary North county council objected to plans to send unmarried mothers to Sean Ross rather than to the county home because the latter was more expensive: 'he did not see why the women should be sent to a mansion in Roscrea'. Another suggested that the superior facilities in Sean Ross would lead to a doubling in the numbers of unmarried mothers - 'Instead of having 40 cases you might have 80 if you send them to a place like Roscrea'. A third claimed that the council was 'putting a premium on immorality by giving them free lodgings', though a colleague expressed the hope that the women 'might get

¹⁴⁶ South Cork Board of Health and Public Assistance, Minutes, 11 Feb. 1931.

¹⁴⁷ First broadcast 18 August 2018. <https://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2018/0807/983666-shame-love-in-shame/>

¹⁴⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 23 Feb. 1929.

¹⁴⁹ *Connacht Tribune*, 9 Feb. 1929.

reformed at Roscrea'.¹⁵⁰ When the County Clare Nursery in Kilrush was closing a meeting of the Clare board of health was told that the 'second-offenders' were refusing to enter an (unspecified) institution, prompting a member of the board to comment that 'It looks like a case of releasing the prisoners so'. A colleague suggested that these women would be 'back again in 12 months'; they were 'a dangerous type to have roaming the country'.¹⁵¹

- 9.103 Occasionally the language used suggests a condescending sympathy, as in the *Nenagh Guardian's* comment that Sean Ross was a shelter created out of 'pity for the unhappy Magdalens of society'.¹⁵² One member of Limerick board of health described unmarried mothers as 'unlucky women' - adding that 'After all these poor women were human beings: the welfare of themselves and their unfortunate blameless children was a matter for the State to attend to'.¹⁵³ However, a 1924 paper presented by the Galway senior assistance officer to a DLGPH conference on 'the administration of home assistance' argued that 'imbeciles and harmless lunatics' should not be given home assistance - their proper place was 'in some institution where they will receive suitable treatment'; if they were left in the community the 'young girls might become unmarried mothers - a contingency doubly abhorrent, increasing the large number of imbecile children already in the country'. He believed that a high proportion of unmarried mothers in Co Galway were 'mentally defective'.¹⁵⁴ In a paper presented to Muintir na Tíre Rural Week in 1939, the assistant county medical officer of health for Kildare, who was a woman, argued that it is 'highly desirable that unmarried mothers, some of whom are often of weak mentality, should not become the outcasts of society and add further to the difficulties of the situation'. She disapproved of unmarried mothers in county homes, and believed that special homes marked 'a decided advance in the solution to the problem'. She suggested that the best outcome for the children was to be reared by their grand-parents, because many children were being fostered in unsuitable homes where the foster parents were only interested in the money.¹⁵⁵

- 9.104 Members of the Galway local authority directed considerable invective against soldiers or Gardaí who were alleged to have fathered 'illegitimate' children. A TD

¹⁵⁰ *Nenagh Guardian*, 25 July 1931.

¹⁵¹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 5 Mar. 1932.

¹⁵² *Nenagh Guardian*, 12 Sept. 1936.

¹⁵³ *Limerick Leader*, 25 Jan. 1925.

¹⁵⁴ *Connacht Tribune*, 12 July 1930.

¹⁵⁵ *Connacht Tribune*, 26 Aug. 1939.

and local councillor complained about ratepayers being responsible for 'the cost of these crimes', suggesting that the women should be sent home to their parents.¹⁵⁶ In the 1950s Galway county council rejected recommendations by Department of Health inspectors that they should appoint a dedicated children's officer, because of the cost to ratepayers, and the fact that 'there must be some limit to the number of officials appointed by the Council' - 'they would eventually have more officers than ratepayers in the county...if parish priests and local councillors took an interest in boarded out children there would be no need to appoint a children's officer'.¹⁵⁷ When this matter was discussed some years later, one councillor expressed disappointment 'that so few had the courage or the humanity to support the weakest section of the community', but this observation failed to sway the meeting.¹⁵⁸ When the Department of Health presented Galway county council with a devastating report on the shortcomings of the boarding-out system in 1956, an editorial in the *Connacht Tribune* commented that

One would imagine that all members of Galway County Council would have been shocked by the report which was before them last Saturday regarding the conditions in which some children are boarded out by the Council. There were some expressions of indignation, but the reaction in a general way suggested that the Council were more annoyed with the case that cruelty could arise in a system that they as a council administered than that a number of children were exposed to the cruelty of neglect and indifference.¹⁵⁹

- 9.105 This editorial was severely criticised by some councillors, which only served to trigger another editorial arguing that the *Connacht Tribune* had highlighted the report

for the purpose of arousing public opinion against the system that permitted the ill treatment of children born, as most of these children were, outside wedlock and who never knew a home other than a public institution. They have no father or mother to protect them, but the ratepayers, who undertake the expense of maintaining them while they are in the institutions, and to some extent after they are taken from the institutions, look to the Council to ensure that they are properly cared for and provided with some at least of the comforts to which all childhood is entitled.

¹⁵⁶ *Connacht Tribune*, 22 Feb. 1936.

¹⁵⁷ *Connacht Tribune*, 12 Dec. 1953.

¹⁵⁸ *Connacht Tribune*, 31 Mar. 1956.

¹⁵⁹ *Connacht Tribune*, 30 June 1956.

- 9.106 The editorial asserted that it was 'not in the best interests of the children - or of the Council - to airily wave aside the Inspector's report and say: "That could not happen here"'.¹⁶⁰
- 9.107 The good name of a community was regarded as important, and it is evident that it could be damaged by reports of 'illegitimate' births. The Galway Hospital and Dispensaries Committee received a letter from the parish priest of Carraroe, complaining about a reference at a previous meeting to an unmarried mother from Carraroe parish - he alleged that the woman had left Carraroe nine years earlier 'and has not been heard of since'; an earlier report of a single mother from Carraroe related to a woman who had been working in Galway as a domestic servant for two years. He suggested that the people responsible for such reports should 'verify their accuracy before casting at the doors of any parish such unsavoury fare'.¹⁶¹

Church and State: providing for unmarried mothers and their children

- 9.108 There is a substantial literature about the relationship between church and state after independence, but it is almost entirely focussed on the national government. Very little has been written about the relationship between the Catholic church and the local authorities,¹⁶² a relationship that was much more overt and much closer than the relationship between the Catholic church and the national government. When county and district hospitals and county homes were being created out of the old workhouse system in the early 1920s many councillors preferred to appoint religious sisters as matrons, believing that they would be more effective.¹⁶³ While the *Local Government Act 1898* excluded religious from standing for election, priests often served as chairs of local committees, including committees dealing with health and related matters. In the fraught climate of Ireland after the civil war, the clergy could achieve authority and consensus. Most matrons of county homes were religious sisters as were many of the matrons of county hospitals. When a matron who was a member of a religious order reached retirement age, the Department of Health contacted the superior of the religious order and invited her

¹⁶⁰ *Connacht Tribune*, 11 Aug. 1956.

¹⁶¹ *Connacht Tribune*, 13 Apr. 1929.

¹⁶² J H Whyte's coverage of the appointment of priests as chairman of vocational education committees, in Whyte, *Church and State in modern Ireland*, pp 37-8, is an exception.

¹⁶³ Mary E. Daly, *The Buffer State. The historical roots of the Department of the Environment*, p. 77-8 noted that when the workhouses were being reconfigured under the First Dáil, religious sisters and lay nurses competed for positions as matron; in Leitrim a lay nurse became matron of the county home, and a religious sister became matron of the county hospital.

to nominate a suitable successor. The posts were not filled by the Local Appointments Commission - which filled permanent local authority posts, and the job requirements provided either that the candidate should be a registered nurse, or alternatively should have 'resided [presumably meaning worked] for a period of not less than two years in a general, clinical or other hospital recognised for this purpose by the Minister'. The file relating to the appointment of matrons to Kilkenny county home indicates that these religious sisters held nursing posts in a variety of district hospitals and other nursing institutions before taking up the appointment as matron.¹⁶⁴

9.109 Local authorities commonly deferred to the advice given by various religious figures about the care of unmarried mothers and their children. Galway county council adopted, without question, the recommendation of the Bon Secours sisters who were in charge of the Tuam Children's Home, that boys should be retained in the home until the age of five, girls until the age of seven and a half years and sometimes later,¹⁶⁵ despite the fact that this was at variance with the practice in other local authorities and contrary to the wishes of the DLGPH that children should be boarded out at two years old. The practice persisted until the Tuam home closed, despite repeated efforts by departmental officials to bring it to an end (see Chapter 15).

9.110 In 1924 the *Connaught Tribune* wrote an enthusiastic account of the Children's Home in Glenamaddy, which was the forerunner to Tuam. This article reflects an unquestioning belief that the religious sisters knew best, together with the opinion that unmarried mothers should not go unpunished, and an awareness of the censorious nature of Irish society towards 'illegitimate' children.

Better a thousand times that these children should remain in some sort of industrial centre where they would learn a craft and be under the control of sympathetic sisters than they should be put to the shame that might be theirs in a home in the hard world outside, where they would learn their origin before they had been given the opportunity to outlive it and to form their character...One day these little mites, if they survive the rigours of life in such a home, will be projected into life. They will have to start with a heavy handicap. That handicap should be lessened as much as it is humanly possible to lessen it. Their care is a grave responsibility, and one cannot but

¹⁶⁴ Department of Health, INACT/ INA/0/448287.

¹⁶⁵ *Connacht Tribune*, 28 June 1930.

feel unbounded admiration for these wonderful, motherly nuns, who know every child by name...Whenever possible, mothers should be sent with their charges. It is the negation of justice that nameless little ones should be sent to a home, whilst the parents go free of responsibility.¹⁶⁶

- 9.111 When a decision was taken to close the Clare county nursery in Kilrush, the Clare board of health sought the advice of the Bishop of Killaloe, Dr Fogarty about the appropriate treatment of unmarried mother and their children. They invited him to nominate a committee of priests that they could consult. Bishop Fogarty assured them that 'the system selected by your Board could hardly be improved' - sending first-time mothers to Sean Ross. The main difficulties concerned 'how to treat those mothers after they leave Sean Ross, as second offenders are not admitted there'; no satisfactory system had yet been determined 'not even the Nuns at Sean Ross, who have almost world wide experience in dealing with this problem'.¹⁶⁷
- 9.112 On the question of whether children who were being raised without their parent(s) should be in an institution, or in foster care, until legal adoption became common, the Catholic Church and religious orders appear to have promoted the merits of institutional care and many local officials and politicians concurred. In 1937 the administrator in the town of Roscrea gave a sermon in St Cronan's Church where he praised the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts who 'gave their lives to this work of assisting the unfortunate Magdalen and her child when friends disown them and the world frowns on them'. He claimed that the Sisters gave the women 'moral uplift', and vocational training. He criticised local authorities for following 'too slavishly the old workhouse tradition of boarding out the little children at too young an age'; he believed they should remain in the care of the religious sisters until the age of six.¹⁶⁸
- 9.113 The chief medical officer of North Tipperary was also highly critical of the practice of boarding out children. He suggested that 'with few exceptions, the homes in which they are accommodated are not ideal. The child is given a minimum education and is usually unfit for any but unskilled labour. On the other hand, life for those children in large institutions, like the present industrial schools, would be equally unsatisfactory'. He qualified the latter statement by noting that the religious

¹⁶⁶ *Connacht Tribune*, 21 June 1924.

¹⁶⁷ *Nenagh Guardian*, 2 Dec. 1933.

¹⁶⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 27 Feb. 1937.

sisters and brothers who ran these institutions 'do for the children committed to them all that is within the power of the nuns and brothers who manage them to do'. He suggested that smaller homes, with a maximum of 20 children would provide 'more of that family life which the children in the larger institutions lack; and they might serve as a place to which the children could have recourse in after life'. He expressed regret that children were not adopted, as happened in England but he viewed adoption as a charitable act.

If childless couples took unto themselves some of those babies whose parents do not provide for their future, there would be less reason to be concerned for the fate of the little ones, for persons who adopt children as a general rule treat them as if they were their own. There could be no greater work of charity than that of giving a true home to an infant whose misfortune it was to be born to parents who did not want it. Is there not something in the Gospel about doing for God whatever is done to one of his little ones?¹⁶⁹

- 9.114 In 1943 the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers sent the DLGPH a lengthy memorandum setting out their findings and opinions on the treatment of children in institutions and children who were in foster homes. It concluded that

The majority of the children with whom we have been dealing are illegitimate. They are handicapped from the start; the circumstances of their birth and their heredity militate against them. We are told that a large percentage are subnormal, or mentally deficient. The aim should be to give them the normal conditions of the ordinary child i.e. a home with the parental affection and encouragement essential to the proper development of the child.¹⁷⁰

- 9.115 Although the DLGPH and the Department of Health consistently pressed for children to be placed in foster care rather than in institutions, many local authorities continued to send children to industrial schools throughout the 1950s and 1960s often in breach of government regulations (See Chapter 11). In doing so they were more in line with the wishes of Catholic religious orders than government policy.

- 9.116 In 1945 reports of the circumstances surrounding the death of a foster child in Britain prompted an editorial in the *Irish Times*. It cited a case in Derry [Northern Ireland] where an 'illegitimate' infant, who had been boarded out with his mother's

¹⁶⁹ *Nenagh Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1947.

¹⁷⁰ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489391.

sister was starved to death, and another case where a Westmeath woman was fined £10 for ill-treatment of a boy who had been boarded out with her by the local authority. The editorial suggested that 'the system as a whole has little to recommend it'. Most of the children were orphans or 'illegitimate'. The editorial urged 'A searching attention to the credentials of would-be foster parents and a system of frequent inspection, preferably by women'.¹⁷¹ In 1946 the *Irish Times* reported on a speech by R.M. Smyllie (the paper's editor) at the AGM of the Nursery Rescue Society, where he stated that 'An attitude of scorn and patronage towards the unmarried mother was entirely wrong. The problem was a social problem, like TB or cancer, and must eventually be solved by State action'. His focus was on foster children. A second speaker at this meeting advocated the case for legal adoption. 'We want a generous spirit of love and affection shown to our children, so that they may grow up to be useful and fine men and women. We cannot bring that about in Ireland if we have not legal adoption'.¹⁷²

- 9.117 By the 1940s there is evidence of public pressure for the introduction of legal adoption, and the topic received attention in the newspapers and in Dáil Éireann. During the 1948 general election campaign, John A Costello, who was elected Taoiseach in the inter-party government that was formed after the election, promised legislation on adoption. This appears to be the only occasion in the first 50 years after independence that any issue relating to unmarried mothers featured in an election campaign. Adoption continued to receive newspaper coverage throughout the 1950s and 1960s but the focus was mainly on the children and adopting parents. The *Adoption Act 1952* is yet another instance where the state accommodated the views of the Catholic church (see Chapter 32).
- 9.118 There were repeated calls from English Catholic charities and occasionally from Irish politicians and clergy for the government to appoint a social worker to the London embassy to work with emigrant women. Such demands tended to blur the lines between material and spiritual welfare - with concerns being expressed about irregular attendance at mass, marriage to non-Catholics in civil ceremonies and unmarried mothers.¹⁷³ In 1948 the government established a Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems. Two members of this commission

¹⁷¹ *Irish Times*, 16 April 1945.

¹⁷² *Irish Times*, 29 May 1946.

¹⁷³ Mary E. Daly, *The slow failure. Population decline and independent Ireland, 1920-1973* (Madison Wisconsin, 2006), p. 264.

carried out extensive inquiries in Britain about Irish emigrants, and they sought information on pregnant Irish women. The published report does not contain any substantial information about Irish women who fled to Britain when pregnant; it dismissed, or perhaps evaded, the topic noting that

for us as a Population Commission, the significance of the problem of illegitimacy rests primarily on the loss by emigration of many unmarried mothers who find it preferable for one reason or another to emigrate rather than to face all the circumstances of an illegitimate pregnancy and confinement in this country.

- 9.119 The report was the subject of extensive, mostly critical, commentary in newspapers and in Dáil Éireann but there is no indication that this statement about unmarried mothers was noticed. However, despite its inadequacy and brevity, the population commission had highlighted the fact that Irish attitudes towards an 'illegitimate' pregnancy, and conditions of 'confinement' were driving women to England.¹⁷⁴
- 9.120 The files relating to boarded-out children reveal instances where officials appear to have failed to distinguish between questions of child welfare and Catholic church teaching. In 1960 Miss Clandillon wrote to a parish priest in Lancashire concerning two sisters who had been in foster care in Ireland and were now working in England. They were aged 21 and 16 respectively so they were 'free agents' and no longer the responsibility of Irish social services. She asked him to send a priest to their address 'to see whether the surroundings are suitable and whether the girls are attending to their religious duties'. She claimed that she was writing on behalf of their 'anxious' former foster mother. Miss Clandillon wrote to another parish priest in England to inquire about the mother of a girl, now a teenager, who was in foster care in Ireland. The mother had married and was living in England. She and her husband had visited her daughter and they planned that she would go and live with them when she reached the age of 16. Miss Clandillon was 'rather worried about the matter as it is not clear whether the marriage took place in the Catholic church or whether the X are suitable people to have the care of Y'. She asked whether 'the family is known to your clergy'. The department inspectors and local authority officials were particularly concerned about cases where a child born in England to an Irish mother was being placed for adoption. When Miss Clandillon received adoption papers from a Scottish local authority with a request

¹⁷⁴ Daly, *The slow failure*, pp 285-9.

that she arrange for the mother, who had returned to Ireland, to sign them, she advised the local authority children's officer to defer action, until investigations had been made as to whether the adopting family were Catholic. She noted that in a recent similar case, a representative of the CPRSI had travelled to Britain, and arranged for the child to be brought back to Ireland for adoption. She noted that the child in this Scottish adoption case appeared to be in his teens (unless as Miss Clandillon noted, the date of birth given was an error), which might mean that he had been living with the prospective adoptive parents for some time but that consideration does not appear to have prevented her from suggesting that their religion should be investigated.¹⁷⁵

- 9.121 An article on lone mothers in twentieth-century England 'challenges the notion that social attitudes became increasingly enlightened over the century'. Thane noted that there was 'moral panic' over teenage mothers in 1960s England because the 'illegitimacy' rate was rising; there were similar concerns in the United States.¹⁷⁶ In Ireland, where the 'illegitimacy' rate remained significantly below the figure for the early and mid-1940s, there is less evidence of moral panic; throughout the 1950s 'most of the bishops were still preoccupied with the same kind of topic as had concerned them in previous years, and their attitudes on these topics had not changed. Indeed, the choice of subject sometimes showed a harking back, not just to the immediate past, but to the Ireland of pre-war years, such as the evil of dance halls'.¹⁷⁷ Repetition of the same warnings for several decades probably blunted their impact.
- 9.122 The proportion of Irish unmarried mothers who gave birth in mother and baby homes was at its height in the 1960s and the overwhelming majority of the babies were adopted. By the end of that decade, however, the expanding numbers of social workers working with socially-committed clergy such as Fr Fergal O'Connor, were beginning to offer pregnant women an alternative to entering a mother and baby home in the form of family placements. By the late 1960s there is emerging evidence of a more sympathetic attitude towards unmarried mothers on the part of some Catholic clergy. This change in attitude reflects greater activism among some Catholic priests about social issues, such as housing, poverty, and rural decline, plus the fact that a growing number of priests had worked as pastors to

¹⁷⁵ Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489433.

¹⁷⁶ Thane, 'Unmarried motherhood in twentieth century England', p. 12. Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 132; Solinger, 'Wake up little Susie', pp 20-40.

¹⁷⁷ Whyte, *Church and state in modern Ireland*, pp 303-4.

Irish emigrants in Britain, where they were confronted with a variety of personal and social problems, including unmarried mothers. The introduction of liberal access to abortion in Britain in 1967, and evidence that unmarried pregnant Irish women were seeking abortions in Britain, was also a factor prompting greater sympathy towards unmarried women who continued with their pregnancy. In 1969 Fr Eoin Sweeney, who had worked for some years as a chaplain to Irish emigrants in England, published a short paper in the Catholic journal *The Furrow* on 'The pastoral care of unmarried mothers'.

The unmarried mother is not a prodigy. She has always been a factor in society, in every social category, and always will be. Education, profession or social status is not a guarantee against this misfortune. And the average girl to whom this happens is a perfectly normal girl, not a psychiatric case. However from the moment that she first realises her plight, she goes through a period of intense strain, sometimes verging on desperation.¹⁷⁸

- 9.123 But efforts to establish a non-denominational council for unmarried mothers - an Irish equivalent of Britain's National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child - were thwarted by a determination on the part of some Catholic clergy to preserve the status quo. In a memorandum sent to all the bishops and to the directors of Catholic adoption societies in January 1971, Fr Barrett, who was about to step down from his long involvement with the CPRSI and Catholic social services in the Dublin archdiocese, stated that a lay-run, non-denominational organisation would have an

utter lack of understanding of the nature of the unmarried mothers' problems. Neglect of her religious duties - Mass, the Sacraments and prayer - is very often the cause of her fall. Repair of that neglect contributes very much towards her rehabilitation.¹⁷⁹

- 9.124 This reiteration of the links between religious practice and penitence restated the case for sending unmarried mothers to mother and baby homes. This argument was not unique to Ireland. Morton, who wrote the history of the Cleveland (USA) mother and baby homes, stated that 'Because of the belief that conversion, whether religious or psychological, is best achieved within an institution, maternity homes remained committed to institutionalization long after it ceased to be

¹⁷⁸ Owen Sweeney, 'The pastoral care of unmarried mothers', *The Furrow*, xx, 10, (10 Oct. 1969), p. 542.

¹⁷⁹ Press cutting on Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448171.

standard social welfare practice'.¹⁸⁰ The total number of women in Irish mother and baby homes peaked in the 1970s, though their stay was significantly shorter than in the past.

- 9.125 When Margaret Bramhall addressed a conference in Kilkenny in 1970 on the unmarried parent in Irish society she opened her speech with the statement that 'Illegitimacy is a subject that until recently was rarely discussed in respectable society',¹⁸¹ and she informed the audience that she was not speaking about Ireland. By 1971 the Department of Health and local officials were taking steps to give pregnant women greater choice both in terms of the late stages of her pregnancy and future arrangements for her child. Thane and Evans, writing about England, suggest that changing attitudes towards single mothers from the 1960s onwards 'owed little to conscious government action'.¹⁸² In Ireland, the silence in Dáil Éireann and the newspapers when the Unmarried Mothers Allowance was introduced in 1973 suggests that the government may have been in advance of public opinion (See chapter 12).
- 9.126 Attitudes towards unmarried mothers in Ireland reveal many similarities with those found elsewhere, but there were important differences. Irish families were less willing to provide a home and support to a daughter who had given birth outside marriage and her child. This was due to a combination of factors - large families, poverty, but above all a concern with respectability and a family's status in the community. In the late 1960s the number of unmarried mothers who kept their child was substantially lower and the proportion of 'illegitimate' babies who were adopted was substantially higher than elsewhere. In 1971 Fr Barrett claimed that 'Parents are not overly sympathetic to pregnant daughters and those allowing them to come home are very small'.¹⁸³ Adoption was introduced later than in any other European country except the Netherlands, partly because there was limited demand (this was a factor promoting legislation for legal adoption elsewhere), and because of the need to enact legislation that accommodated the views of the Catholic church. Psychology and social work were disciplines that were slow to develop and they therefore had a minimal role in provisions for unmarried mothers before the 1970s. The decades after 1970 are marked by a determination to preserve the constitutional ban on divorce and the prohibition on contraception,

¹⁸⁰ Morton, *And sin no more*, pp 50-52.

¹⁸¹ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448171.

¹⁸² Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 3

¹⁸³ Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/448171.

and the enactment of a constitutional amendment protecting the life of the unborn, but this rear-guard action to preserve Ireland's distinct moral and legislative culture coincided with a steady rise in the number of unmarried mothers.