Chapter 12: Unmarried mothers and their children in the late Twentieth century: from the 1960s to 1998

12.1 The things they say

‘What did I do to deserve such a daughter’
‘It’s a fate worse than death’
‘If we had heard that you had cancer it would have been easier to accept’
‘Why didn’t you go to England?’
‘Of course your [sic] not going to keep the child’
‘Every child needs two parents’
‘You are thinking of yourself not of the child’
‘Your child will hate you when it’s eighteen’
‘Of course you never think of the family’
‘What about your poor mother’
‘Your child will be a bastard’
‘What about the neighbours’
‘Couldn’t you have it adopted?’
‘Have it adopted and you can come home’
‘But you’ll never get married if you keep the child’.  

12.2 This chapter focuses on the years from the mid/late 1960s until the end of the 20th century. This was a time of major change in Irish society. Ireland ceased to be a country of late marriage, large families and a high rate of permanent celibacy. The 1973 Report of the Commission on the Status of Women recommended significant reforms relating to women’s work, legal status and welfare entitlements. In the 1970s the prohibition on married women working in the public service ended and women were given legal protection against being dismissed from their job because of their pregnancy. Women in insurable employment became entitled to maternity leave in 1981. There was a sharp rise in the number of ‘illegitimate’ births and in the numbers of children being raised by single mothers. In 1973 unmarried mothers who decided to keep their children became eligible for social welfare payments. The number of adoptions, which was the outcome for most ‘illegitimate’ children born in the mid-late 1960s, fell steadily. In 1975, the number of adoptions

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1 Department of Health, RM/ARC/0/489397. No source or date is given for this document, but other material in this file relates to the late 1960s.
2 Employment Equality Act 1977
was 57.4% of the number of ‘illegitimate’ births; in 1976 this fell to 43.4%; by 1980 the figure was 29.9%; in 1990 it was 8.5%. By the end of the 20th century almost no Irish babies were adopted outside their immediate family. Pregnant Irish women continued to travel to Britain, but from the 1970s, they were seeking abortions. Despite these changes, a substantial number of women continued to be admitted to mother and baby homes throughout the 1970s. In 1980, a total of 552 babies were born to women who were in mother and baby homes, which was higher than the 498 in 1950 or the 456 in 1960. The numbers only fall significantly in the 1980s, when mother and baby homes closed, down-sized or were replaced by flatlets and hostels, and these services tended to cater for women with particular needs.

12.3 Despite the absence of divorce until the late 1990s, Irish family structures underwent changes that were broadly similar to other western countries. A growing number of children were born outside marriage and were living in a single-parent family, most commonly with their mother; many children were living in households with a resident male who was not their father, and/or with siblings who had different fathers.

12.4 Hostility towards unmarried mothers waned; however the attitudes of parents, family and the community continued to impact on the decisions made by single mothers. By the 1970s the Catholic church was adopting a much more sympathetic attitude. This change was partly and perhaps primarily prompted by concerns over the high numbers of single Irish women having abortions in England where abortion laws were relaxed in 1967. Single mothers were no longer absent from the narrative; they wrote to the newspapers and they were interviewed by journalists. An Irish unmarried mother had greater choices and some financial resources to assist her in keeping her child. Social attitudes had mellowed, but many single mothers continued to experience poverty and personal difficulties that demanded new forms of support.

**Unmarried mothers in literature and the media**

12.5 “The maturity of any society can be gauged from its list of taboo subjects. One of these for many societies even today is ‘illegitimacy’. It is not something that is openly discussed, certainly not in Ireland.”

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12.6 There are very few references to unmarried mothers in Irish media before the 1960s, and they are generally found in reports of local authority meetings, church sermons, court cases and fictional writings. (see Chapter 9). Irish society did not comment much in public about unmarried mothers or what happened to them or their children, though private commentary and condemnation may have been widespread. It is only in the 1960s, with the emergence of advice/problem pages in Sunday newspapers and women’s magazines and the development of investigative journalism, that more personal stories emerge. The 1960s constitute a watershed in terms of public information and public discussion about extramarital pregnancy. Until that time unmarried mothers’ voices were almost completely absent, but they began to emerge in letters to advice columns, and occasionally in press articles. The growing number of articles may not have been accidental. Thane and Evans note that during the 1960s the British National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child built up its media contacts including “with a group of reliable journalists”. They list a series of newspapers and periodicals that were targeted; it includes the Irish Times.5

12.7 Adoption was one of the first topics to bring unmarried motherhood into mainstream Irish media. A growing interest in Irish emigrants to England and their difficulties also focussed attention on unmarried mothers. PFIs had featured in regular communications between British and Irish churches, and officials from the 1930s onwards, but these communications were not generally known to the public. During the 1960s the Catholic Hierarchy held annual Easter conferences on emigration and the proceedings were reported in the newspapers. PFIs featured frequently in conference papers and discussion. Any investigation of the reasons why pregnant Irish women travelled to Britain raised questions about Irish attitudes towards pre-marital pregnancies, and conditions in mother and baby homes.6 In 1969, Reverend Vincent Buckley, director of missions to emigrants, claimed that ‘Many suffered from a persecution complex which they believed would be manifested by being read by the priests from the altar’, and ‘by being ostracised by parents and friends’.7 These emigrant conferences were one aspect of a growing interest by the Catholic church in contemporary social problems. The publication in 1966 of Tuairim’s pamphlet Some of our children, which investigated the number of Irish children in institutional care, and the increased publicity given to conditions

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6 Daly, The Slow Failure, pp 296-305.
7 Cork Examiner, 11 April 1969.
in institutions such as Artane Industrial School, prompted questions about the identity of these children, and why they were in long-stay institutions. The Tuairim pamphlet was written by a group of Irish university graduates who were living and working in Britain.\(^8\) A new generation of Irish-published women’s magazines provided an outlet for articles on topics relating to women and sexuality. Magazines and national newspapers published letters from women seeking advice on a range of personal matters, including extra-marital pregnancy. The letters and the responses of ‘agony aunts’ exposed readers to the reality of pregnancy outside marriage and the difficult choices faced by unmarried mothers.

**No Birthright**

In 1964 the *Irish Times* published seven articles by Michael Viney on the topic of unmarried mothers; the articles were subsequently published as a short book under the title *No Birthright. A study of the Irish unmarried mother and her child*. Viney opened with the story of Clare, who went to England on discovering that she was pregnant - the outcome of rape by her boyfriend, who was a foreign doctor. Clare kept her child, despite pressure from social workers in the London hospital to place him for adoption. She did not tell her parents about their grandson until he was several months old. They refused to permit her to bring her child home. Her mother was concerned about what the neighbours might think - ‘The neighbours had always ruled her view of things’. She said that they would have to move house if Clare was seen with her baby. Her father urged her to have her son adopted. Clare’s story highlighted parental attitudes. Viney also reported the case of a woman who wrote to a Catholic priest in London asking him to tell her daughter, who was a single mother, not to set foot in Ireland - ‘she has disgraced her family and her country’. English social workers reported that Irish girls were terrified of their parents knowing about their pregnancy - most went to England to keep it secret. A social worker in a London Catholic agency commented on the ‘fear’ of Irish pregnant women: their expectations of moral censure. Viney cited stories of Irish emigrant couples who, rather than face parental censure over a pre-nuptial conception, placed their child for adoption. Fr Munn of the Southwark Rescue Society suggested that greater publicity about pregnancies among single women might reduce the fear of scandal, and fears of damaging a family’s reputation.

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12.9 These articles provided information about provisions for unmarried mothers, the role of social workers in Dublin maternity hospitals and the repatriation of ‘pregnant from Ireland’ (PFIs). The article on mother and baby homes said that the women were ‘protected by a benevolent conspiracy of unexpected thoroughness and ingenuity’; the Sisters helped women who did not wish family or friends to know of their pregnancy to keep it a secret. Viney suggested that the homes had an ‘unfavourable, out-of-date image…of a forbiddingly austere institution in which the unmarried mother is likely to be shut away for two years or more, doing useless work in the laundry at the bidding of censorious nuns’. Women fled to England, determined ‘not to be shut away for two-and-a-half years’; refusing to have their child ‘put out to slave labour on a farm’. He suggested that this was ‘an out-of-date impression’; the position had changed since the introduction of adoption and washing machines. The Mother Superior of one unnamed home claimed that ‘moral censure…is no part of our work. We’re here to help not lecture’. He described the accommodation as ‘furnished simply’ but ‘by no means Spartan’. The overall impression was of ‘a fairly good-class boarding school for girls’, and indeed the routine of early rising, morning mass, ending with time in the evening spent watching television, dancing or listening to the radio is similar to a boarding-school time-table at that time. Mothers whose children were placed for adoption might leave within eight weeks of giving birth, though a mother who ‘opts’ for an American adoption might have to remain for up to 15 months. Viney asked whether these mothers resented the ‘good fortune’ of mothers whose babies were taken by the CPRSI enabling them to leave at a much earlier date. He claimed that some mothers ‘do seem perfectly happy to stay in the sheltered, unexacting environment of the home for a year or more’; some might be ‘reluctant to return to the everyday stresses of life outside’, but he queried whether the boarding-school regime was appropriate for women who would be resuming ‘adult life’. He also commented, indirectly, on the absence of advice/counselling services asking ‘is guidance in spiritual terms alone sufficient to help them face up to life again?’

12.10 The final two articles dealt with adoption. He stated that the children of Irish unmarried mothers had a ‘four to one chance’ of being adopted. The fear of ‘what people will say’ was the most important factor deterring women from bringing their baby home. Working-class Dubliners were most likely to keep their babies and to tell their parents that they were pregnant. In the closing paragraph of the series he noted that
The legal machinery of good child care already exists in Ireland; it is in the implementation and practice of it that there are failures and omissions…public attitudes - not the law - are primarily responsible for a lot of unnecessary suffering…even from a non-religious, humanist point of view, the production of an ‘accidental child’ outside the security of marriage is socially irresponsible. But there is a world of difference between condoning conception outside marriage and treating the unmarried mother and her child in an un-Christian, inhumane way.

12.11 He again quoted the phrase ‘what will the neighbours say’, as ‘an expression of taboo… Many cruel things are being done in its name’.

An Triail

12.12 An Triail, or in English, On Trial, was a play by Máire Ní Ghráda, that was written as a court trial. It concerned a young, rather naïve woman from the west of Ireland who became pregnant by a local schoolteacher. She fled to Dublin, gave birth in a tenement and killed the baby. The summary of the play in the Field Day Women’s Writing, states that ‘secrecy, hypocrisy, prejudice and negligence are the real cause of the crimes’. An Triail was first produced in Irish in 1964, at the Dublin Theatre Festival; it ran for four weeks in Dublin’s Damer Theatre, before travelling around the country. President de Valera attended a production at the Cork Opera House. It returned to the Damer for a further run, and was produced on television in February 1965 attracting further plaudits. An English-language version opened in Dublin’s Eblana Theatre later that year.9 In those days, most Irish households could only receive one television channel, so the Sunday night broadcast would have reached a large audience. A review of the English language version in the Irish Independent, Ireland’s best-selling daily newspaper, noted that

In its terribly real reflection of individual attitudes, the play is undoubtedly the most eloquent indictment of society’s collective and unchristian cruelty towards the unmarried mother that has come out of this country. In its quiet and unsentimental compassion, it is also the most moving portrayal of a betrayed girl’s personal tragedy.10

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10 Irish Independent, 20 April 1965.
12.13 The *Irish Times* review of the original production carried the headline

*An Triail* is Viney stressed on stage, crystallised into a searing drama that challenges every aspect of the nation’s treatment of this social problem. …The ultimate stigma: the Irish mother reared in our version of the competition with the Joneses, backgrounded as it is by a religious outlook smug with righteousness and the betrayal by the invincible and ungetatable man; the system of secret domicile (pungent with the threat of blackmail information to the parents) - all this is challenged as well as the adoption system in which all the drab history is quietly smothered…the girl in *An Triail* is in every hostel-citadel in the country where fallen women do penance for the babies they must lose to the comfortable (if barren) and where hypocrisy hides its head.\(^{11}\)

12.14 A speech by the widowed mother of the young woman captures some of key themes in this play:

Mother: But don’t blame me for what happened. God knows I worked hard to give her a good Christian upbringing. It was the will of the Lord to leave me a lone widow, with my man dying on me three months before my youngest child was born. I’ve had to work and to save and to make sacrifices to bring up and to educate my family, with not a living soul to lift a hand or a foot to help. My head bent and my back bent from dawn till dark, working and slaving and sacrificing myself. And what have I for it in the heel of the hunt? What had I but to be disgraced in the eyes of the world. I can’t lift my head, but the neighbours mocking me and whispering about me behind their hands, and tittering at me as I show my face at church or at chapel, at fair or at market among them.

Counsel for the defence: The neighbours would appear to be your predominant concern.

Mother: I have to live my life in their midst.

Counsel for the defence: Would it be true to say that your harshness drove her from home? Would it be true to say that you attempted to get rid of the unwanted child?

Mother: It’s neither a sin nor a crime to get rid of an unholy thing that was accursed at its making by both God and men…(she bursts into noisy tears). She deceived me. She deceived me wilfully and wickedly…

Adoption and Agony Aunts

12.15 The rising number of adoptions received extensive coverage in national and local media. Adoption was generally presented in a positive light, though a 1947 comment by an unnamed ‘special correspondent’ that adoption was ‘Not nearly as simple as it looks’; that there was a need for ‘a full examination of all the circumstances’, suggests a more critical attitude. The annual reports of the Adoption Board were summarised in national and local newspapers. Local newspapers reported on meetings of the Adoption Board in their area, which appears to have been designed to raise awareness of adoption and encourage couples to consider adopting a child. In 1966, for example, the Limerick Leader claimed that there was an apparent lack of interest in adoption in Limerick compared with Cork. The article suggested that those interested should contact the Limerick Catholic adoption society. ‘Once an adoption order is made, the child legally belongs to his new parents and no further enquiries are made by the Board’. This particular article appears to have been effective; when the Adoption Board came to Limerick 12 months later, it reported a 60% increase in the number of adoption orders - a total of 23.

12.16 Although most coverage was positive, some columnists presented questionable statements. In 1959 Fr Lucius McClean, a regular columnist in the Sunday Independent, headed his column, ‘Is it wise to adopt?’ He was responding to a letter from a couple who were considering adopting a specific baby who would soon be born to an unmarried mother; this adoption was being facilitated by a priest. Fr McClean claimed that many people were ‘ready enough to take an orphaned child but would be afraid to take an illegitimate child’ - fearing that the parents ‘might have been wicked or wayward people’ and the child might have inherited tendencies ‘that would present problems later’. He advised this couple to review medical advice to see whether there was any prospect of them having a child; if not they should adopt this child, because the priest who was acting as intermediary knew the birth mother and they could be assured that ‘despite the fall...she is a good girl and that her child will be more than just physically sound’. Fr James Good of St Anne’s Adoption Society took serious issue with this article. In a private letter to Fr McClean he said that ‘no reputable adoption worker would commit herself to arrange the adoption of an unborn infant’; the priest mentioned in

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12 Connacht Tribune, 29 Nov. 1947.
this article ‘presumes far too much and far too often’; he failed to understand that a woman might have second thoughts about adoption following the birth of her child. He criticised the suggestion that would-be adoptive parents should bypass registered adoption societies in favour of private arrangements. Monsignor Barrett, director of the CPRSI, not commonly an ally of Fr Good, shared his concerns; he informed him that Fr McClean had agreed to write an article correcting some of his statements, when he returned from America.\(^\text{16}\) Private adoption placements were not illegal in Ireland until the late 1990s but such practices facilitated illegal registrations of births. The family background of adopted children was a major cause of concern to would-be adopters at this time; another article recommended that adoptive parents should not seek information, lest it cause them undue worry and stress. Several articles discussed the possibility that a mother might change her mind and reclaim her child from adoptive parents; the journalists’ sympathies appear to be very much with the adopting parents.

12.17 During the 1960s the problem pages of Irish women’s magazines and Sunday newspapers emerged as a source of advice/information. Several correspondents claimed that they became pregnant not knowing the full ‘facts of life’. A 17-year-old who was raised by adoptive parents, apparently happily, wanted to contact her birth mother, but Angela McNamara dissuaded her ‘don’t let your curiosity drive you needlessly hurting her now’.\(^\text{17}\) A correspondent who had just discovered that she was adopted and was disturbed at learning this and wanted to learn about her parentage was advised that

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\text{Your adoptive parents are truly generous and loving people. You are their much wanted child. Please don’t hurt them and be proud of them as they are of you. If questions occur outside, say quite naturally that you are adopted and that information about the circumstances of adoption are not given. This is wise, because when parents give up a child for adoption the situation is thoroughly investigated at the time and what is best for the child is done. So do rest content that the best was done for you.}\quad\text{\(^\text{18}\)}
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12.18 Columnist Joan O’Brien told a woman who had been adopted that it was perfectly natural that she was interested in learning about her mother. But she advised that it might prove difficult to trace her mother, and ‘meeting her might not be

\(^\text{16}\) Cork Diocesan Archives, St Anne’s Adoption Society, Box 23.  
wonderful. She may have married and had a family, and not want to be faced with
evidence of a past mistake. Or she may have had a difficult life and be different
from the kind of person you hope she is’. A long article in *Woman’s Way*
described the case of a couple whose final adoption order was delayed for several
hours when the birth mother arrived in the court, though she ultimately agreed to
sign the adoption order.

12.19 McNamara advised a pregnant single woman who was under pressure from her
parents to marry the father of her child and no longer felt that she loved him, to
reconsider her attitude, because ‘John was standing by you in your trouble…In
marriage you can start anew, and give your child its due - a father, a mother and
family life’. Her column in the *Sunday Press* frequently featured letters from
young women who were pregnant, and an occasional letter from the father of the
‘illegitimate’ child, seeking information about facilities for unmarried mothers. She
generally referred them to the CPRSI; an inquirer from Cork was referred to the
local health authority. These queries in a public medium were new; they
confirmed the views of English social workers that Irish women were not aware of
what services existed and more information should be provided.

12.20 Many articles relating to unmarried motherhood concentrated on PFI (Pregnant
from Ireland) cases. In 1968 Michael Keating described pregnant women who
travelled to Britain as ‘fugitives from a society they believe to be cold and without
understanding and they are fleeing from Ireland’s most dangerous weapons - the
whispered insinuation and the glance through curtained windows’. This and other
articles were part of a wider campaign for government assistance to provide
welfare supports for emigrants; single mothers comprised a significant component
of the emigrants who needed assistance. Keating suggested that

The average Irish unmarried mother’s ideas of conditions in this country’s
mother and baby homes are based on out of date rumours and idle gossip. In
a recent press article Dorene Reihill mentioned some existing impressions
such as ‘these places are like jails…the girls are made to work in the fields up

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19 *Woman’s View* – formerly *Model Housekeeping*, Dec. 1966. It is not clear from this article whether this referred to a
court case or a hearing of the adoption board.
24 The Commission has failed to identify this article.
to the time they go into labour’, or ‘the nuns allow the babies to die at birth because there is nobody to look after them’. These ideas are commonplace.

12.21 The Mother Superior of Bessborough described such descriptions as ‘one of the major problems curtailing the spread of our work’. She claimed that many people were not aware of the existence of Irish mother and baby homes. ‘For those who have heard of them the image is of young girls almost locked in dungeons or being denounced hourly by the staff for their sins’. However Keating concluded that ‘There is rarely some smoke without fire’. He quoted a London-based social worker who ‘was disturbed that two girls whom her society had repatriated, returned again to England with alarming stories of conditions in the mother and baby home to which they were sent in Ireland’. 

12.22 *Sunday Independent* columnist Brenda Maguire asked:

> how do we treat the child born out of wedlock? …The child born of an illegitimate pregnancy has done no wrong. Yet we treat him as a second class citizen. Why innocent babies should suffer the stigma of “illegitimacy” because of the sins of their parents, is a question that merits deep and serious thinking. Surely, there are no “illegitimate” babies only “illegitimate” parents?

12.23 Maguire’s article focused on adoption; she described the positive experiences of a childless couple who had adopted a child. This prompted responses from a number of unmarried mothers. One mother criticises Maguire for describing these babies as ‘children whose birth is more an embarrassment than a joy’. In a follow-up column Maguire acknowledged that few would regard adoption as the ideal solution. ‘There is something wrong with a society where this is the accepted practice’; it must have ‘a traumatic effect on a child to be told one day that he is adopted’. She claimed, incorrectly, that mother and baby homes were run in the main on voluntary contributions and she praised the Sisters who ‘do a wonderful and sympathetic job and undertake work that the remainder of society (including the parents, friends and colleagues of the unmarried mother) turn their back on, or refuse responsibility for’. She dismissed complaints from unmarried mothers at having to do housework before and after the birth, pointing out that many pregnant mothers with families ‘cook, wash and polish right up to the birth of the baby and

within a few days after the birth they are back in harness again’. Maguire concluded by noting that

We all have something to learn from these letters, because whether or not we face up to it, we are all involved…girls become unmarried mothers through weakness, some lack in their upbringing, immaturity, ignorance or sheer misfortune. The climate of opinion might with profit change, so that unmarried mothers and their children are not asked to pay for what is only one of the many mistakes we all make. But self-pity, whatever the reason, and however great the cause, solves nothing at all.

12.24 The *Sunday Independent* published two letters from unmarried mothers to accompany this article. One was from a Protestant woman who had raised her child - now 14 years old. She secured an affiliation order against the father, but only received 12s 6d a week, which was later increased to £1. The second, from a Catholic woman whose child was adopted, was headed ‘Call them Baby Factories, Markets’. She asked whether a tolerant society ‘forces the unmarried mother to seek “Rescue and Protection” in an institution?’ She described a regime of waking up at 6.45 am (6.30 on Sundays and 5.45 after the baby was born). After mass, breakfast, ‘a plentiful supply of white bread’; after breakfast, allotted work in laundry, kitchen or convent; ‘The only therapy the girls get is the recitation of the aspiration “O Mary by thy pure and immaculate conception, obtain for me purity of body and sanctity of soul” innumerable times each day’. She claimed that most women in the home ‘were paid for by the Adoption Board of their county’. 27 These letters appear to be the first occasion when the unmediated voices of single mothers are reported in an Irish national newspaper. A *Seven Days* programme, ‘All Our children’, broadcast in November 1968 included comments by unmarried mothers on their situation, but these were voiced by an actress. One reviewer of this programme claimed that it was

a terrible indictment of our approach to the girl who ‘gets into trouble’. Our ‘solution’ is callous, cruel and quite simple. The girl vanishes either to England or behind the walls of an anonymous ‘home for Unmarried Mothers’. Tongues wag and heads nod knowingly. The unmarried father goes completely free…And as one girl in the programme put it ‘In Ireland it’s a sin you pay for all your life’. 28

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27 *Sunday Independent*, 16 March 1969; the Adoption Board had no role in mother and baby homes; most women were paid for by their local health authority.
12.25 The *Irish Times* featured two articles by Cork-based journalist Mary Leland later that year that were prompted by a forthcoming report by the Cork Health Authority about facilities for unmarried mothers in the county. Leland featured the story of a 23-year-old woman who became pregnant as the result of a casual sexual encounter. She continued at work until the final month of her pregnancy, when she was admitted to a mother and baby home that was almost certainly Bessborough. Her employer was willing to pay for her maintenance in a maternity hospital or nursing home of her choice. Leland claimed that this young mother was shocked to discover the large number of women in the home. ‘It was the first indication she had that there were many others in her situation’. She claimed that ‘the girls were nice to each other…but she liked only three of the nuns’ - those who were most closely involved with her during labour and delivery. She was not given any antenatal instruction about what to expect during labour;\(^{29}\) she was cared for by a Sister who was a qualified midwife and two ‘inmates’, and she was given drugs to relieve the labour pains. ‘The midwife told her what to expect at each stage, the girls brought her tea and sympathy’. The midwife, assisted by a nurse, delivered the baby. Leland noted that there was not sufficient staff to care for the babies and the mothers, so each mother fed, washed and cared for her own baby until the baby was adopted. The young mother was stunned when her baby was taken away - ‘I knew she was being taken to a foster home…but I hadn’t expected it so soon…I thought my heart was broken’.\(^{30}\) A second article described a visit to Bessborough. Leland noted that ‘The Reverend Mother is well aware that Bessborough has an unfortunate - she didn’t say unpleasant - reputation. But, as she points out, the girls themselves can hardly publish how nice the place is, as in doing so they would reveal their familiarity with it’. Leland acknowledged that many women ‘still feel that it is a prison, where their sentence may be of years’. The Mother Superior was concerned that this reputation prevented unmarried mothers from going to Bessborough ‘until they are frantic with fear and see it as a place to hide’. Leland described how women were assigned a ‘house name’, and addresses were set up where post could be sent if the woman wanted to conceal the fact that she was in Bessborough. She corroborated statements made in her previous article, i.e. that the women were not given any information about the labour or birth until they were actually in the labour unit. She spoke to one woman, ‘a tall graceful girl of 24’, who only learned what facilities were available to her from Angela McNamara’s newspaper column. She had planned on going to England

\(^{29}\) That would have been the norm for all first-time mothers at this time.

until she learned of the CPRSI. Her boyfriend had refused to accept that he was the father. ‘Her family know nothing of it all; she writes long letters describing non-existent activities. She prefers it that way. Still she has been under terrific mental strain, the high point of which will come shortly, as her baby will soon be adopted’. This mother had bought clothes to dress the baby prior to her going away, ‘She dreads it - “it’s like death. I can’t describe it”’. She would have kept the baby ‘if she had had any help at all’.

12.26 Leland noted that the mothers that she met were not bitter, ‘they would like to see some social acceptance of the unmarried mother and her child…for them it seems as if society is something from which they are now safely removed’. The Mother Superior would also like to see ‘a willingness on the part of parents to accept the girl and her child but feels that this will not come for a long time’. She commented on the fact that the fathers of these babies were free whereas the mothers were ‘trapped’.31

12.27 Leland’s articles prompted several letters in response; one was from the proud adoptive father of three children. A woman took issue with her comment that ‘the stringent cleanliness of the whole place indicates the somewhat unpalatable fact that much of the housework is done by the girls themselves’. She pointed out that most married women did all the housework until they gave birth, and often looked after several children as well. One letter came from a single mother who had been in Bessborough and kept her child. Her description of the home as ‘a baby factory and a baby market’ suggests that she had read the letter in the Sunday Independent which was discussed earlier. She described Leland’s articles as ‘sensitively and very well written’; they had made her see Bessborough in a ‘more objective and less horrific light’. When she was there, she was ‘on the border of mental breakdown’. She suggested that Leland had failed to confront the question of adoption; ‘judging from the remarks of the girls, the pro-adoption brain washing campaign is as effective as ever’. She described adoption as ‘akin to capital punishment - it involved the taking of a life’.32 Leland contacted the Mother Superior before replying to these letters. The Mother Superior confirmed that all women underwent a Wassermann test, but Leland pointed out that the test was obligatory for all pregnant women in England and in the Dublin maternity hospitals.

though not in Cork. The Mother Superior claimed that most work in the laundry consisted of folding nappies.\footnote{Irish Times, 20 Aug. 1969.}

12.28 Newspapers and magazines published several articles about mothers who had kept their babies. Angela McNamara while condemning pre-marital sex was supportive of families who assisted a daughter to raise her child within the wider family. In 1969 she featured a letter from the mother of a pregnant, single 19-year old, who wrote about the ‘shock and hurt’, the fact that ‘there would be talk around here if our girl brought the baby home’. She and her husband sought advice as to what they should do. McNamara encouraged them to bring mother and baby home. ‘Whenever it is possible for the baby to remain with its mother and become part of the family, this is the most ideal solution’. McNamara cautioned that the entire family should be prepared for comments in the neighbourhood, ‘each member of the family must be prepared for these, and must be able to support your move in having the child home’, but if they remained calm, ‘the gossip will die down, and in fact people will admire you’.\footnote{Sunday Press, 6 April 1969.} A woman who had apparently written to Angela McNamara when she was pregnant, intending to place her child for adoption, had changed her mind and was now asking for information about day nurseries where she could place her child during working hours.\footnote{Woman’s Way, 23 Oct. 1970.} Joan O’Brien published a letter from a single woman with her own home, who had gone through her pregnancy alone ‘because my relatives were all against me’. She brought her baby home from hospital but he later died. O’Brien commended her for her courage in living ‘as an unmarried mother to be in the place where you always lived’, and she referred to the probability that a single mother and her child might be ‘the object of unkind comment in the neighbourhood’.\footnote{Woman’s View, 10 Jan. 1967.}

12.29 Journalist Ella Shanahan described the pregnant unmarried Irish ‘girl’ as ‘one of the loneliest people in any community anywhere in the world’. She claimed that the ‘awful stigma’ attaching to unmarried mothers was ‘a peculiarly Irish phenomenon’; she compared it to the inhumane attitude shown towards young girls raped by soldiers during the war in Bangladesh. At a time when she was most in need of assistance and sympathy the unmarried mother ‘finds herself bereft of parents, former friends and neighbours, and dogged by financial and material worries’. She claimed that attitudes were changing.
Being unmarried and pregnant no longer means that a girl must incur the wrath of her family and the sly and vicious talk of neighbours. It no longer means that she must enter into an unworkable marriage, doomed from the start or that she must take the first boat to England. Girls who find themselves in this unfortunate position can now have their babies quietly and confidentially at home in Ireland, and return to their homes and jobs within a short time, and no-one save a social worker and one or two other strangers need ever know.

12.30 She emphasised that services for unmarried mothers had improved, but Shanahan presumed that the baby would be adopted.

Social Research, Policy, Changing Attitudes and Provisions

12.31 The late 1960s was marked by a rise in pre-marital and extra-marital sex throughout the western world. The three books cited below all have chapters with ‘sexual revolution’ in their titles. The sexual revolution is generally associated with the availability of the contraceptive pill, though the evidence from the United States, Britain and Australia suggests that the relationship between the two was complex. Hera Cook, writing about Britain, comments that: ‘The pace of change in the second half of the 1960s was astonishing. By the late 1960s, many of those who wanted a new sexual morality felt able to talk openly about wanting sex before (and a different approach after marriage)’. She notes that ‘From 1965 to 1969, there was a transformation of sexual mores. This happened as a result of supplying contraception to women publicly and solely for the purpose of sexual pleasure, indeed explicitly to prevent reproduction’. In Australia a growing number of unmarried couples were living together by the early 1970s and public disapproval of such arrangements was declining. In the United States there was increasing sexual activity among single women, though the early adopters of the pill were overwhelmingly married women. In Ireland access to contraception was prohibited under the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935, though the contraceptive pill became available in 1963/4 as a means of regulating a woman’s menstrual cycle. Despite the prohibition on contraception, a family planning clinic opened in Dublin in 1969; by the early 1970s condoms were being imported and distributed in

39 Frank Bongiorno, The sex lives of Australians, A history, (Collingwood, Victoria, 2012), chapter 8, Sexual revolution’, pp 222-58
40 Elaine Tyler May, America + the pill, (New York, 2010), pp 71-91.
Ireland by mail order. In 1974 the Irish Family Planning Association clinic at Synge Street reported that 43% of their clients were unmarried and 53% were under twenty-four years. A survey by Emer Philbin Bowman of the women attending this clinic suggested that while three out of five single women were planning to marry in the near future, two out of five had no such plans. While the proportion of single women who were sexually active was rising, it was lower than in Britain or the United States, and the age of first intercourse was higher. She concluded that Ireland was experiencing - albeit more slowly - the changes in sexual behaviour found elsewhere, and lack of access to contraception was not a deterrent. Most of these women were well-educated and from middle-class backgrounds, and all but 6% were sexually experienced, and indeed they had been sexually active for an average of 2.2 years before coming to the clinic. By 1975 almost half of the clients attending this family planning clinic were single women, but opinion polls showed that 20% of respondents and only 21% of young married women were in favour of contraceptives being available to single people. Between 1968 and 1979 the number of ‘illegitimate’ births in Ireland more than doubled from 1,558 to 3,331. The Health (Family Planning Act) 1979 made it legal to supply contraceptives ‘for the purpose, bona fide, of family planning’, which was generally assumed to limit access to married couples, though that was not explicitly stated. Access to contraception did not become widely-available in Ireland until the enactment of the Health (Family Planning), (Amendment) Act 1985.

12.32 The late 1960s brought changes with respect to unmarried mothers and their children. Forty mother and baby homes in Britain closed in the late 1960s (English homes tended to be much smaller than those in Ireland). The numbers of babies being adopted in Britain peaked in the mid-1960s, so trends in Ireland were not out of line, though the proportion of Irish women in mother and baby homes and the proportion of ‘illegitimate’ children who were adopted were much higher in Ireland. In 1973 Britain’s National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC) changed its name to the National Council for One-Parent Families, and expanded its remit to include all single-parent families such as separated or divorced women and men. These changes were in response to pressure from public opinion and parents who contacted them. It was also consistent with the British government’s appointment of a committee to investigate the problems

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41 Irish Independent 8 April 1974
facing one-parent families - the Finer Committee was appointed in 1969; it reported in 1975.44 This practice of seeing unmarried mothers and their children as part of a wider community of one-parent families became a common feature in the policy and practice of social work in many western European countries though unmarried mothers ‘continued to be the most seriously disadvantaged lone parents’.45 In Ireland unmarried mothers continued to be seen as a distinct category until almost the end of the century. By the late 1960s, 90% of ‘illegitimate’ children born in Ireland were placed for adoption; the next highest rate in Europe was 35% (the country is not stated, it would appear to have been either Britain or Sweden). In Denmark, 93% of unmarried mothers kept their babies and fewer than 7% were adopted.46 However Ireland was changing. Fr Gabriel Colleran, chaplain of the CPRSI, claimed that 60% of the women who contacted the CPRSI in 1969 had informed their parents, and they were supportive;47 but 40% of parents were either unaware of their daughter’s pregnancy or unsupportive. The birth rate to unmarried women was rising, as was the number who gave birth outside mother and baby homes.

12.33 There was a 50% increase in the number of unmarried mothers giving birth in Holles Street between 1966 and 1971; almost a quarter of the mothers (24%) were 18 years or younger.48 In 1969, 27.8% of Irish unmarried mothers gave birth in the three Dublin maternity hospitals. When interviewed by officials in the Department of Health, the chief social worker in the Rotunda said that unmarried women who gave birth in the Rotunda ‘were encouraged to wear wedding rings, receive male visitors if possible during husbands’ visiting time, and generally to give the impression toward mates that they are married…..A disturbing feature in 1970 was the development of co-habitation’.49

12.34 A profile by Dr Declan Meagher of 400 consecutive unmarried mothers who gave birth in Holles Street highlighted the increased medical hazards of ‘illegitimate births’. The health of a new-born baby was strongly linked to maternal health and the quality of ante-natal care. Most women who became pregnant while

49 Department of Health INACT/INA/ 0/448171
unmarried, married before giving birth. Over 50% of the unmarried mothers who gave birth in Holles Street had received no ante-natal care until the final month of their pregnancy; 17% first received care when in labour. Many complications of pregnancy, including some serious complications, were significantly higher among the 400 unmarried mothers than the hospital average. Hypoxia - interference with oxygen supply to the baby, which put infants at risk of death or brain damage - affected 20% of the unmarried mothers. The incidence of anaemia - a reflection of social disadvantage, and a failure to be prescribed iron tablets, which was standard practice in the hospital’s ante-natal clinics - was twice as common among unmarried mothers. These additional risks reflected the financial and social stress of a pregnancy outside marriage. A failure to attend ante-natal clinics meant that blood pressure and the development of the foetus could not be monitored. Doctors often lacked accurate information on gestation date, which meant that it was more difficult to identify infants at risk from failure to grow in utero. The greater risks were not unique to Ireland. In Finland in the 1980s, despite a high incidence of cohabitation and social tolerance of pregnancy outside marriage, there was a 45% difference in the rate of ‘small for gestational age’, a 17.5% difference in the rate of preterm birth and a 26% difference in the incidence of babies weighing less than 2.5kg, approximately 5 lbs. at birth.

Seventy per cent of the unmarried mothers in the Holles Street study held service jobs, 20% were unemployed and the remainder were still at school. Many came from disadvantaged families; some were the children of single mothers. Single mothers from more privileged family backgrounds probably gave birth in private nursing homes. Dr Meagher claimed that there was ‘an over-representation of girls who have themselves been illegitimate and who have grown up in the emotionally sterile, unisexual atmosphere of an institution and who are thrown at an early age into a world of whose complexities and subtleties they have learned little’; he described these women as ‘clearly vulnerable, emotionally, intellectually and otherwise’. He suggested that the inadequate medical care received by unmarried mothers reflected their sense of shame, which made them reluctant to attend ante-natal clinics. As long as Irish society condemned unmarried mothers it made it more difficult for them to seek medical care. Impressionistic evidence suggested that many of their infants failed to thrive; they had a higher incidence of infection.

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and remained physically backward until placed for adoption. Children who failed to thrive were not placed for adoption; they were retained in institutions, which meant that they continued to fail to thrive. He claimed that there was discrimination against adopting children who were handicapped. Unmarried mothers also had a poor standard of post-partum care; many failed to return to the hospital for a check-up. He recommended that the government should pay a special maternity grant to single mothers at an earlier stage in pregnancy to encourage them to enrol for ante-natal care.\(^{52}\)

12.36 The *Reformatory and Industrial Schools Systems Report 1970* (commonly known as the Kennedy Report) noted that a high proportion of children in industrial schools were the children of unmarried mothers. ‘Traditionally a stigma attached to the unmarried mother at various levels - family, neighbourhood, official - which made it extremely difficult for her to keep her child. Financial and housing difficulties added to the problem’. The report suggested that there was a trend ‘towards a softening of this attitude in recent years. The unmarried mother now meets with more sympathy and understanding than was once the case and everything possible should be done to encourage this trend’. The ‘first prerequisite’, was ‘sympathetic advice and help’ from the welfare authorities and voluntary organisations.

The object should be to help the mother to keep her child if at all possible. The alternatives available should be explained and sufficient time given to enable her to consider the problem fully. Adequate benefits should be available to enable unmarried mothers to keep their child. Support should include housing, providing day nurseries and other facilities to enable her to work, if she wished...

A sympathetic and helpful approach to all problems is essential and any hint of discrimination on the part of authorities, organisations or individuals must be rigorously avoided. Social workers should be on hand to provide mothers with advice and support.\(^{53}\)

12.37 Ireland was extremely late in developing a cohort of professionally-educated social workers, because many of the institutions and agencies that cared for deprived children, adults with special needs and unmarried mothers were run by voluntary organisations, whose staff commonly lacked professional training. The censuses

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\(^{52}\) *The unmarried mother in the Irish community*, p. 35.

in 1961 and 1966 list ‘social welfare worker’ as an occupation, but most of those included under that heading were probably home assistance officers and senior home assistance officers. The first census to list ‘social worker’ as an occupation was 1971; there were 831 social workers - 476 men and 355 women.\textsuperscript{54} The Irish Association of Social Workers was established that year.\textsuperscript{55} In the 1981 census the numbers had more than quadrupled to 3,680 and a majority - 2,004 - were women.

12.38 The Dublin maternity hospitals had employed almoners/social workers for many years. During the 1960s there is evidence of greater interaction by these social workers with unmarried mothers. In the year 1966/67 a social worker was appointed to Pelletstown (see Chapter 13). Kilkenny and Limerick established social service councils - partnerships between the Catholic church, voluntary organisations and the local health authorities. The 1969 report of the Limerick social service council noted that

Since 1965 a professional casework service was available to multi-problem families throughout the city, and during 1967 was intensified in St John’s Parish. Voluntary workers were recruited, assessed and trained. They worked in St John’s Parish under the direction of the social welfare workers, especially to help the mothers of underprivileged families…Casefiles were opened and classified under the following headlines: Itinerants, men of non-fixed-abode, adoption, unemployed and its consequences, marital problems, alcoholism, mental and physical handicap, childcare, housing and unmarried mothers.

12.39 This service was funded by the Catholic diocese of Limerick; its bishop, Jeremiah Newman, had both an interest and expertise in applied sociology.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Health Act 1970} created regional health boards in place of county-based services, which facilitated the appointment of specialist child-care professionals and social workers. By 1971 the Eastern Health Board, which covered Dublin and surrounding area, employed three children’s officers (who were mainly nurses) and

\textsuperscript{54} It is unlikely that these were all professionally qualified social workers. The first social worker in the statutory health services was employed by the Dublin Health Authority in 1966; by 1971, its successor, the Eastern Health Board, had 11 ‘social workers’ but they were not all professionally qualified. The first professional qualification for social workers in Ireland was introduced in 1968; see \textit{Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin 2009}, page 108. \url{http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/DACOI%20Part%201.pdf/Files/DACOI%20Part%201.pdf}

\textsuperscript{55} Caroline Skehill, \textit{History of the present of child protection and welfare social work in Ireland} (Lampeter, 2004), p. 103.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Limerick Leader}, 29 Nov.1969
several social workers (as noted above, not all were professionally qualified); one social worker was based permanently in Pelletstown.\textsuperscript{57}

12.40 In 1972 Fr Colleran, who had succeeded Fr Barrett as director of the CPRSI, contacted the Department of Health to inquire about the arrangements with regional health boards for dealing with unmarried mothers, and the need to ensure confidentiality. His request was prompted by the experiences of two women who had been admitted to Pelletstown. One, a native of Leitrim, had contacted the CPRSI the previous autumn, ‘in a very upset state’. She was determined that no family member should learn of her pregnancy. The CPRSI arranged that she would be admitted to Pelletstown and they would arrange for her baby’s adoption. Some days before her baby was to be placed, an official from the North Western Health Board rang the CPRSI and informed them that he had arranged adoptive parents for the Leitrim woman’s baby. He also phoned the mother in Pelletstown - she was shocked by the call, as they were acquainted, and he wished to place her baby with a Leitrim couple. This man made a similar intervention in another Leitrim pregnancy. In the latter case the woman was told that the health board would pay for her maintenance only if they placed her baby for adoption. The CEO of the North Western Health Board explained that the particular official was intervening in matters ‘outside his bailiwick’; this man believed that ‘anything anybody could do in regard to adoption he could do better’. The CEO promised that this would not recur. In response to a query from the Department of Health to all the health boards, prompted by these events, the CEO of the Western Health Board explained that a code number was used for each mother when paying bills in mother and baby homes. Enquiries were limited to determining that the mother lived within the Western Health Board area; individual files were under lock and key. Another health board explained that they automatically acquiesced in any requests from CPRSI to sanction admission to a home, without seeking the woman’s name.\textsuperscript{58} In the 1970s the Mother Superior in Bessborough claimed that the greater concern for confidentiality created difficulties in billing health boards and some health boards had refused to pay for a patient.\textsuperscript{59}

12.41 From the early 1970s social workers attached to the regional health boards assumed a greater responsibility for unmarried mothers in their area. They

\textsuperscript{57} Sunday Independent, 10 Jan. 1971
\textsuperscript{58} Department of Health HPO/INA/O/425641
\textsuperscript{59} Department of Health, INACT/INA/O/538770.
informed women about their social welfare entitlements and options; arranged their admission to a mother and baby homes if that was the woman’s wish; visited her while she was in the home, and they outlined future arrangements for mother and baby. Evidence given to the Commission relating to Pelletstown and Dunboyne confirmed that social workers attached to the regional health boards paid regular visits to women in mother and baby homes, who were supported by that particular health board. Visits were also made by social workers attached to charitable organisations such as the CPRSI. These regular visits by social workers changed the culture of mother and baby homes.60 Women who were undecided as to their future and that of their child had access to a professional social worker, who might suggest alternatives to those presented by the Sisters in the home. Health board social workers co-operated with voluntary agencies, which were beginning to employ professional social workers. In 1973 there were four agencies in the Cork-Kerry region working with unmarried mothers, all employed trained social workers. Two were voluntary agencies; two were run by the Southern Health Board. One of their goals was to dissuade women from travelling to England.61 In 1973 the Southern Health Board published a brochure, written by social workers, listing the services for unmarried mothers in that area; this ready access to information reflected a major cultural change from past secrecy.

12.42 In 1967 Mary Frances Creegan, author of a master’s thesis on unmarried mothers in Pelletstown, suggested that ‘illegitimacy’ and unmarried motherhood constituted ‘a source of strain in the society as a whole’. The only solution was ‘to work to change the attitude of society… If the mother decides to keep the child while remaining unmarried she may be faced with years of struggle and difficulty in an attempt to bring up a child without the support of a husband or family’. She noted that in Britain there was a trend from institutional to community care for unmarried mothers but in Ireland ‘as yet’ no alternative existed ‘for mothers who cannot remain at home…but efforts are being made’. She was referring to a family placement service established by the Irish Dominican priest and UCD political philosopher Fergal O’Connor that was later known as Ally. Creegan highlighted two issues: the need to change social attitudes so that pregnant single women and unmarried mothers could live in the community, ideally without feeling a need to conceal their status, and providing pregnant single women with an alternative to a mother and baby home. The 1968 report of the Rotunda Hospital stated that the

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60 Based on evidence given by the Good Shepherd Sisters and by social worker.
Rotunda was using Fr O’Connor’s scheme. The social worker also noted that an increasing number of single mothers were keeping their babies - ‘(almost all want to)’. Those who did not have family support faced major difficulties - the greatest being lack of suitable housing, the inadequate level of home assistance and the low maximum payment that could be secured from putative fathers.\textsuperscript{62} Twenty of the 98 unmarried pregnant women who attended the Coombe in 1968 married the father of their child, either before or after the birth.\textsuperscript{63}

12.43 In 1971 the Irish magazine \textit{This Week} carried a cover story about ‘illegitimate’ pregnancies. It suggested that women who entered Pelletstown ‘encounter, successively, professional compassion, adequate care for self and infant a minimum three-month period of protection from Society’s stigma and finally a bruising emotional encounter with the harsh realities of unmarried parenthood in Ireland’. This article suggested that before the birth of their child ‘local authority and Department function effectively even kindly’. Women had a range of options, but these options ‘taper off following the birth, forcing mothers into adoption’.\textsuperscript{64}

\textbf{Kilkenny Conference}

12.44 The article in \textit{This Week} was almost certainly prompted by a major conference in Kilkenny on ‘Community Services for the unmarried parent’: the first conference on this topic in Ireland. The event was organised by Kilkenny Social Services, a consortium of voluntary social services in the city and county, initiated by the Catholic Bishop of Ossory, Peter Birch. An undated document in the files of the Department of Health, which was probably written in 1972/3, states that a group of people interested in unmarried mothers had begun to meet in the Dominican Priory in Dominick Street approximately six or seven years earlier (presumably with the support and involvement of UCD lecturer and a member of the community, Fergal O’Connor) and they came up with the idea of establishing an Irish National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child. The Kilkenny conference was designed as part of that process.\textsuperscript{65} Newspaper articles suggest that the conference was instigated by Fergal O’Connor and others who were keen to develop alternatives to mother and baby homes and adoption. They invited Margaret Bramall of the

\textsuperscript{62} Clinical Report of the Rotunda Hospital, 1968, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{63} Clinical Report of the Coombe Hospital, 1968, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{This Week}, 12 Feb. 1971.
\textsuperscript{65} Department of Health HPO/INA/O/425641 425641
NCUMC to speak in Dublin in the summer of 1970. Many of those involved were professionally-trained social workers.

12.45 The agenda for the Kilkenny conference was largely based on the Council of Europe’s resolution on Social Protection of Unmarried Mothers and their Children, which was published in May 1970. It set out a series of recommendations with respect to medical and social care, employment and housing facilities. Among other things, member states were asked to stimulate a greater comprehension in society of the problems faced by unmarried mothers and their children and to bring about ‘the use of non-discriminatory terminology with regard to the mother and children in question’. The non-discriminatory language is evident in the title of the Kilkenny conference - ‘unmarried parents’; however the report of the conference proceedings used ‘unmarried mother’ in the title.

12.46 The Council of Europe’s resolution expanded on paragraph 17 of the European Social Charter (which had been agreed in 1961) which set out the rights of mothers and children to appropriate social and economic protection irrespective of marital status and family relations. The underlying premise was that the health, satisfactory upbringing and the future of every child was dependent on the capacity of a mother to provide her child with ‘a welcoming home and…the social and psychological situation created by society’. The Council of Europe’s resolution highlighted the importance of appropriate social and medical care during pregnancy to reduce the high rates of stillbirth and infant mortality. It was opposed to segregating unmarried mothers and children, suggesting that social workers should not deal exclusively with them. It set out recommendations that member states should adopt: providing comprehensive information about the medical and social services available to unmarried mothers; health care and social and psychological supports during and after pregnancy; supporting a mother in retaining her job and facilitating access to vocational training following the birth of her child; temporary housing during pregnancy; assistance in finding suitable housing for mother and child, plus day nurseries and other facilities; a guarantee that single mothers and children had access to the same benefits as other families; assistance in establishing paternity and securing maintenance from the father of her child. Psychiatrist Dermot Walsh, who edited the proceedings of the Kilkenny

66 This Week, 12 Feb. 1971.
67 https://rm.coe.int/native/09000016804c3355
68 https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168006b642
conference, noted that the Council of Europe document ‘hardly mentions adoption’. 69

12.47 The Kilkenny conference was attended by 161 women and men from all the major state and voluntary organisations involved with unmarried mothers and their children. No unmarried mother was present. A pencilled note by Miss Clandillon recorded that 43 attendees came from health authorities, six from government departments, two from the Dublin Corporation housing and welfare unit. The remainder were attached to social service and welfare agencies operated by the Catholic and Protestant churches; social workers attached to hospitals or working in the community; representatives of mother and baby homes, adoption societies, and agencies working with children, marriage counselling and related services. More than a quarter of those present - 42 - were religious Sisters; evidence of their greater freedom post-Vatican II.

12.48 The opening session was chaired by Dr McAdoo, Church of Ireland Bishop of Ossory, Ferns and Leighlin; the second session was chaired by Dr Birch, the Catholic Bishop of Ossory. The opening speech, by Minister for Health and Tánaiste Erskine Childers, adopted a conservative tone. He began by suggesting that ‘the unchristian attitude often encountered towards the unmarried mother…stemmed from the traditionally high regard for the sanctity of marriage’. He warned ‘against the danger of double-thinking by expecting Irish communities to have the highest regard for the sanctity of marriage, and, on the other hand, to accept without qualms procreation outside of marriage’. Parents and neighbours should display ‘a Christian response’ to unmarried mothers. He praised the ‘excellent work’ of mother and baby homes, suggesting that in addition to medical care appropriate for a normal birth they provided ‘a range of social services including counselling for the girls and placement of the babies’. He described medical services for unmarried mothers as adequate but acknowledged that social services should be improved. There was also a need to provide advice and information to prospective unmarried mothers, and it was vital that those providing information and advice should respect the need for confidentiality. There was ‘an obligation to give the mother a real choice’ between keeping the baby or placing it with foster parents or for adoption. He asked whether the special difficulties facing mother and child and the lack of financial or social support justified the existing

69 The unmarried mother in the Irish community, p. 11.
tendency to favour adoption. However he did not indicate any plans to provide mothers with financial support to enable them to keep the baby.  

12.49 One of the most important speeches was given by Margaret Bramall of the NCUMC. She described the experiences of unmarried mothers in Britain and in Scandinavia; she claimed that Scandinavia offered the best support for unmarried parents. Bramhall expressed the opinion that the high proportion of single mothers who agreed to adoption reflected ‘the punitive attitude of society’, although the number placed for adoption in Britain was falling. She claimed that most single women in the UK who became pregnant continued to feel ‘fear, guilt and shame, and suffer deeply because of the grief they feel their families will undergo’; ‘we still have not attained the situation where one can honestly say that any mother who wishes to do so can bring up her child rather than have him adopted’. She highlighted the importance of social attitudes to an unmarried mother - ‘unless society is accepting of her and willing to treat her as an ordinary citizen worthy of dignity and tolerance, the very services that are needed will never be provided because if state or local authorities are to make provision for a minority group there needs to be a firm public opinion’.  

12.50 Minister Childers made several references to the importance of confidentiality, whereas Bramhall was determined to puncture the ‘aura of secrecy’. She echoed the Council of Europe’s resolution which advised against segregating unmarried mothers because, ‘it isolates and diminishes the status of the mother and makes it less likely that society will accept her’. Segregating services for unmarried mothers prevented agencies from comparing married and unmarried women and consequently they had too high expectations of single mothers. She noted that single mothers were expected to behave in a different manner to other mothers - ‘in some countries it is almost accepted as normal that they should part from their children for adoption, even though this can be a tragic bereavement from which they may never recover’. The churches continued to provide services for unmarried mothers in Britain; Bramall suggested that there might be disadvantages in concentrating these services in religious organisations, especially as ‘the problem is related to the moral attitudes of society to religious organisations in a country where lay statutory workers are the general rule’. She told the conference that it was important to foster independence among single mothers; if the mothers

70 Department of Health INACT/INA/ 0/448171
and children were hidden away ‘we shall never get society to accept them or to appreciate their problems’. She welcomed the proposal in the Council of Europe’s resolution that the state should guarantee a regular maintenance payment to all one-parent families. The senior assistance officer of the Dublin Health Authority supported Bramall’s suggestion that public services for single mothers should form part of wider services for widows, deserted wives and families.71

12.51 During the course of his address to the conference, Fr Colleran, chaplain to the CPRSI, criticised the family placement service operated by Fr Fergal O’Connor. He suggested that it might fail to protect the secrecy of pregnant women and the women might receive unprofessional advice from a host family. He even suggested that some marriages might be threatened because the husband could become emotionally involved with their house guest.72 This aspect of his speech was criticised in the media.73 The conference discussed the merits of small family group homes, ‘in preference to the large impersonal institution which had been only too common a feature of services in the past’. The Mother Superior in Bessborough spoke of seeing large impersonal homes in the United States, a description that may also be applied to Bessborough though she did not say this. She claimed that it was unrealistic to condemn mother and baby homes when no alternative existed and Irish society remained hostile to unmarried mothers.74

12.52 Several speakers indicated their remorse and the need to improve on past treatment of unmarried mothers. Bishop Birch suggested that Irish society had lacked the social and moral responsibility to ensure that unmarried mothers and children were brought up in suitable environments. He claimed that the children of unmarried mothers, lacking affection, became unmarried mothers.75 The conference heard from Dr Declan Meagher (whose paper was summarised above), and from psychiatrist Dr Dermot Walsh, who highlighted the fact that mental health care was an important part of medical care for unmarried mothers. Many single women who became pregnant required specialist psychiatric treatment. They suffered from depression; ‘a period of intense rejection, rejection of above all herself and very often of the father of the child, and perhaps rejection of the baby’.

74 The unmarried mother in the Irish community, pp 7, 28.
75 The unmarried mother in the Irish community, pp 9-10.
Unmarried mothers were, ‘inevitably’ at greater risk of psychological disturbance than the general population. Dr Walsh suggested that in mother and baby homes, where large numbers of pregnant girls and young infants live together under the same roof, a great deal of emotional damage and trauma can be effected, as the tensions which each girl at this particular time holds within herself tend to overflow onto the others and in doing so to build up large resonating waves of disturbance and turbulence.

He highlighted the damage to the children of unmarried mothers resulting from institutional care, and the importance of early adoption to prevent the damage from the ‘mass environment’ of mother and baby homes.\(^76\)

12.53 The report of the conference, which was edited by Dr Walsh, stated that ‘the conference expressed the opinion that it was a fundamental human right that a mother should be given all assistance to keep her child’; the state had a responsibility to ensure that she had the social and financial support that would enable her to do so. The senior assistance officer of the Dublin Health Authority suggested that a single mother and her child constituted a family, one that required greater support than a two-parent family.\(^77\) The concept of civil rights - which was extensively deployed at the time in relation to Northern Ireland - also cropped up. Dr Walsh noted that Irish society provided ‘absolutely no assistance’ to enable the unmarried mother to exercise her fundamental human right - that of keeping her child; deserted and unsupported wives, widows and prisoners’ wives were also treated as second-class citizens.

One single deficiency emerged more indelibly than another. It was that we in Ireland offer little real alternative to adoption and that in doing so we violate the basic human right enshrined in the Council of Europe document that the mother has a right to retain her child and that that right must be supported and fostered by the provision of services to make it possible.\(^78\)

12.54 The report of the conference highlighted the need to stimulate:

modern mass communication media…to make public opinion aware of the problems of unmarried mothers and their children and to seek to obtain a greater comprehension of those problems by society, with a view to doing

\(^{76}\) The unmarried mother in the Irish community pp 18, 20-1, 37

\(^{77}\) The unmarried mother in the Irish community, pp 5-6.

\(^{78}\) The unmarried mother in the Irish community, pp 11, 51-2.
away with prejudice against them and to securing their acceptance on an equal footing with other families'.

The conference attracted extensive media coverage including a number of supportive editorials. The *Irish Independent*, echoing the 1916 Proclamation, noted that ‘the State has a duty to cherish all its children equally and while insisting on the marital family as the basic unit in society it was not entitled to ignore the unmarried mother and her child’.

One of the underlying motivations for the Kilkenny conference was to establish an Irish equivalent to the NCUMC; a single organisation with representation from all parties involved in providing for single mothers and their children. The idea was proposed by the prescient Alice Litster in the 1940s; (see chapter 5) it featured among the demands made by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement (IWLM) in their manifesto *Chains or Change*. The IWLM claimed that ‘The unmarried mother who keeps her child does not officially exist as a class as far as this State is concerned. It is time she was recognised’. They called for a central organisation to ‘help and rehabilitate the unmarried mother’, and advise her on practical and financial matters, ‘encourage her to keep her child if she so wishes’; assist her in finding housing, employment and crèches and engage in a programme of public education to improve public attitudes towards unmarried mothers. Bramall alluded to this proposal in her speech, as did Minister Childers, who said that he would welcome such an organisation and gave a commitment of Department of Health assistance.

The proposed Irish national council for unmarried mothers would be lay-controlled, and non-denominational. It would act as a publicity/referral agency; press for statutory provision to enable mothers to keep their child, including financial support and housing, and conduct research into single motherhood. The conference failed to reach a decision on establishing a national organisation, perhaps because Bishop Birch and the Bishop of Kerry, Eamonn Casey, expressed reservations. Both men were influential; Bishop Birch was the founder of Kilkenny Social Services, and Bishop Casey had worked closely with single mothers in London. Bishop Birch suggested that if a national council was established, it was important

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79 This comes directly from the Council of Europe resolution.
81 Published March 1970.
that shy unmarried mothers from rural areas were not excluded; he believed that they would be more inclined to seek assistance from someone known to them. Yet evidence presented elsewhere in the Commission’s report, and in this chapter, suggests that many women sought assistance far from their home to protect their privacy. Bishop Birch feared that the proposed council would be ‘another, cold impersonal efficient Dublin group dictating to the whole country’. Bishop Casey was dubious about the proposal, and his views carried some weight, given that he had been a member of NCUMC while in Britain. He believed that unmarried mothers should be looked after as part of wider provisions for families in need, rather than being segregated.  

12.58 The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr McQuaid, opposed the formation of a non-denominational organisation under lay leadership. Fr Barrett, the long-time director of the Dublin archdiocese’s Catholic Social Service Conference and the CPRSI, alleged that, although the Kilkenny conference ‘purported’ to examine the Council of Europe’s recommendations, the main agenda item was a proposal to establish an Irish variant of the NCUMC. He described the conference as ‘non-denominational’; there were many Protestants in attendance; ‘at least two of the main speakers were agnostic’. One panel contained no member of a Catholic voluntary society. The proposal for a national council was ‘conceived by people who, though well-meaning, certainly lack adequate experience and would appear to have ultimate objectives differing substantially from those of the Catholic agencies’; the Archbishop of Dublin was not consulted before the conference. Fr Barrett rejected claims that a publicity/referral agency was needed; the CPRSI, doctors, priests and ‘women’s journals’ provided adequate information. Working with unmarried mothers demanded ‘the highest degree of prudence and confidentiality…over-publicity could very well damage the work by robbing it at the onset of the quiet, controlled and discreet manner in which the good and balanced worker tries to carry it out’. This put him in direct conflict with those who believed that publicising unmarried motherhood would help to remove stigma and prejudice.

12.59 Fr Barrett expressed fears that the role of publicising services for unmarried mothers would be ‘handed over to or taken over by a non-denominational body that could not be controlled by the Church and would scarcely show sensitiveness towards our attitudes’. This agency would ‘exercise a very powerful influence on

the activities of all voluntary agencies in this field, by simply not using those of which it did not approve’. A lay, non-denominational organisation would have ‘serious implications for the spiritual and moral welfare of our Catholic unmarried mothers’. It would have no interest in their ‘spiritual rehabilitation’; there was no guarantee that Catholic social workers would be made responsible for Catholic mothers. He claimed that the proposal revealed an utter lack of understanding of the nature of the unmarried mother’s 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.

He echoed Fr Colleran’s opposition to family placements because they might discourage women from entering mother and baby homes. He queried the proposal that single mothers should be provided with an allowance and housing to enable them to raise their children. If the number of mothers who were keeping their child was increasing (and he had no statistics on the subject), he believed that this reflected greater willingness by parents to accept their daughter and her child into the family home, though he conceded that the numbers who did so remained small. He acknowledged that some women came under parental pressure to place their baby for adoption. Parents justified their refusal to permit their daughter to return home with her infant by referring to the ‘family reputation, their daughter’s future, the interests of their other children’. He believed that most mothers readily consented to their child’s adoption at six months; most of those who withdrew consent were marrying the child’s father. Providing an unmarried mother with the necessary support to enable her to raise her child was ‘not a panacea’. Few women wanted to live independently with their child. An unmarried mother and her child would be unable to survive on an allowance equivalent to that given to widows and deserted wives; giving them a higher allowance would raise an outcry, as would allocating public housing to single mothers given the long waiting lists for local authority housing. He claimed that ‘any experienced social worker will agree that these cases are exceptionally difficult to support through to ultimate success’.

Fr Barrett expressed the opinion that unmarried mothers were ‘in some instances at least, unstable, perhaps even in need of psychiatric care’; their children showed ‘signs of deprivation’ by pre-school age. A mother’s right to her child ‘derives from her duties to her child’; if she was unable to provide ‘a normal upbringing’ the child should be adopted.
12.61 Fr Barrett further claimed that the CPRSI had been providing financial assistance to unmarried mothers who were raising their children for some years - supplementing their wages or home assistance, but these arrangements were not successful. Mother and child missed the support of a father/husband, and ‘whether she started with a high-minded sense of duty…or a more emotional and natural, but often in effect selfish, reluctance to part with her child’ in time the mother found herself unable to cope.\(^{84}\) There is no indication as to the number of mothers who were assisted by the CPRSI to keep their children. Its annual report for 1969 does not contain a heading for such expenditure, unless it is included in ‘Grants to Foster Mothers and Others’ - totalling £517 - which was a tiny fraction of the CPRSI annual expenditure of £21,409.\(^{85}\)

12.62 Fr Barrett’s memorandum was circulated to all bishops and to the Central Council of Catholic Adoption Societies. It is evident that he was using this organisation as a means of thwarting the formation of the proposed non-denominational national council.\(^{86}\) In January 1971 Fr O’Mahony (now in charge of St Anne’s Adoption Society) reported to Bishop Lucey of Cork on a recent meeting ‘where it became obvious to me and to a considerable number of non-Dublin delegates’ that Monsignor Barrett was using the council ‘to preserve the national status’ of the CPRSI ‘and knock a group different to him in Dublin’.\(^{87}\) *This Week* claimed that he had ‘capture[d]’ the Central Council of Catholic Adoption Societies - whose role was to co-ordinate the work of all Catholic adoption societies, and they noted that Archbishop McQuaid was reluctant to see it controlled by another bishop.\(^{88}\)

12.63 *Irish Press* journalist T P O’Mahony reported on these efforts to block the proposed national council for unmarried mothers. An editorial in the same issue commented that ‘Even a cursory acquaintance with the situation here in Ireland would suffice to show that in attitude toward and provision for unmarried mothers we have an awful long way to go’. There was ‘no room for smugness or complacency…new thinking and new approaches are vital, especially at a time when it is being increasingly recognised that many unmarried mothers accept adoption only because of society’s punitive attitude towards them’.\(^{89}\) Fergal O’Connor emphasised that the

\(^{84}\) Irish Press, 25 Jan. 1971, copy on Department of Health INACT/INA/ 0/448171
\(^{85}\) CPRSI, Annual report, 1969.
\(^{87}\) Cork Diocesan Archives, St Anne’s Adoption Society, Box 29, letter from Fr O’Mahony to Dr Lucey, 29 Jan. 1971.
\(^{88}\) This Week, 12 Feb. 1971.
Kilkenny conference had been organised by a group of professional social workers, several of them working with unmarried mothers, and whose goal was to expand and supplement existing services and promote greater co-operation between the agencies. Fr Barrett’s assertion that they had no experience of working with unmarried mothers was incorrect. He rejected Fr Barrett’s suggestion that non-Catholic social workers were not concerned about the spiritual welfare of Catholic clients. Fr James Good, the Cork theologian and former director of St Anne’s Adoption Society, continued to press the case for establishing an agency that would help single mothers to examine their options ‘as rationally and as deliberately as the circumstances allow’. In its absence he suggested that ‘we will continue to have these girls making decisions on inadequate or inaccurate knowledge, we will have them pressurised into decisions which they will regret as soon as they are made’.91

State supports for the single mother and her child

By 1971 the position for mothers who were determined to raise their child was somewhat better than in the 1930s. A growing number were in insured employment, which entitled them to maternity benefit for six weeks before and six weeks after the birth of their child. A mother with social insurance could apply for unemployment benefit; mothers who had exhausted this benefit or did not qualify could claim home assistance, a discretionary payment disbursed by local authorities to persons with inadequate means to survive (see Chapter 1). The proportion of the population in receipt of home assistance varied widely between counties, as did the criteria for eligibility. As it was funded by the rates, counties with a high rateable valuation - areas with larger farms and fertile soil - had greater rateable income. In 1966 the national average of recipients was 5.2 per 1,000; it was 14.3 in Kilkenny, 13.3 in Tipperary South, but only 6.38 in Tipperary North.93

There are no statistics as to the number of unmarried mothers in receipt of home assistance for themselves and their child. In 1937 there were 1,046 ‘illegitimate’ children receiving home assistance; whether these children were being raised by their mother or another family member is unclear. In 1937, 3,939 able-bodied women were receiving home assistance; the numbers who were unmarried

93 Availability for employment was a condition for getting this payment. Very often, mothers with small children (whether unmarried or married) were not regarded as meeting this criterion because of their childcare responsibilities. The same criterion meant that most mothers did not qualify for the means tested unemployment assistance.
Occasional pieces of information relating to boarded-out children suggest that in some cases a grandmother or grandparents received home assistance to enable them to care for their daughter’s child. These statistics were not published in the 1960s so it is impossible to determine how many unmarried mothers were in receipt of home assistance.

12.65 Seamus Ó Cinnéide, whose 1970 book remains the only substantial study of home assistance, cited an undated memorandum that was supplied by the Assistance Officers and Senior Assistance Officers Association listing their duties. They included ‘assisting unmarried mothers with the many problems arising from their condition; making contact with their parents or with doctors; arranging adoptions and maternity hospital accommodation or facilities in homes for unmarried mothers; helping to arrange for the rehabilitation of these girls.’ 95 It does not refer to assessing their eligibility for home assistance. Ó Cinnéide sent a questionnaire to all the public assistance authorities asking what weekly rate they would pay to various home assistance recipients. The numbers of assistance authorities replying and weekly payments were as follows (the amounts are in shillings, there were 20 shillings to a pound).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single man living alone</th>
<th>Unmarried mother one child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10s - 25s</td>
<td>4 local authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>55s</td>
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<td>70s</td>
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<td>Over 70s</td>
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12.66 This suggests that all local authorities paid home assistance at varying rates to unmarried mothers. One county manager emphasised that payments were discretionary; similar cases did not necessarily get similar rates. There is some evidence that by 1970 home assistance was seen by the Department of Health as a means of providing financial support to unmarried mothers who wished to raise their child. A long file on the topic of children in care, at a time when responsibility for unmarried mothers, foster children, and all aspects of children in care was being transferred to the new regional health boards, includes the suggestion that

95 Ó Cinnéide, A law for the poor, p. 9.
home assistance ‘should be recommended (if the Legal Advisor agrees) as an adjunct to boarding out and an alternative to placing children in institutions’. A draft Circular no. 70 titled *Children in Care*, which was being drafted in 1970 to be sent to the health authorities, included a section on unmarried mothers, which contains the phrase ‘Should she decide to retain her child she should be assisted in doing so in every way open to the Health Authority’, though it does not mention home assistance. This circular marks the first apparent acknowledgement by the Department of Health that unmarried mothers should be assisted to keep their child.

12.67 In 1967, 5% of those receiving home assistance in Dublin city were married women who were not supported by their husbands; the majority of these were deserted wives, in the remaining cases the husband was in prison. Assistance officers generally referred cases of deserted wives with children to the ISPCC. Home assistance records did not include a separate classification for unmarried mothers with children. Ó Cinnéide interviewed only one unmarried mother for his study. This woman was atypical: she had six children ranging in age from 20 to two. In 1971 *This Week* suggested that the Dublin Health Authority tried to ensure that a mother had £5 a week after paying her rent, and home assistance was calculated accordingly. The article concluded that any single mother who wished to keep her child ‘faced a major economic struggle’. Until March 1972 the maximum sum awarded under an affiliation order was £1 a week, regardless of the wealth or income of the father. From that date a district court could award a maximum of £5 a week, and there was no limit to the award made by the High Court, but few unmarried mothers applied for maintenance orders against the father of their child, and an even smaller proportion secured long-term support.

12.68 In November 1972, two years after the Kilkenny conference, journalist Mary Maher reported that provisions for unmarried mothers had not changed; women who decided to keep their child had no entitlement to financial assistance or accommodation. Services continued to be provided on a sectarian basis. She reported that a group of women was meeting in Dublin with a view to founding an

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96 Department of Health, CCL/INA/O/523143 The file does not contain the final version of this circular
97 Ó Cinnéide, *A law for the poor*, pp 41-2, 84.
98 *This Week*, 12 Feb. 1971.
organisation for single mothers. A report on the Church of Ireland Social Service confirmed the continuing importance of denominationally-based services. A social worker attached to the Department of Health noted that in 1971 over half of the cases coming to the attention of the Church of Ireland Social Service related to ‘illegitimacy’, and ‘the demands for help from unmarried parents continues to increase’. She had discussed the implications of the expansion in local social services (through the regional health boards) with the director and senior social worker of the Church of Ireland Social Service. They all agreed that in light of the volume of work associated with ‘illegitimacy’, ‘and bearing in mind traditional attitudes in rural Ireland to this problem’ the need for the Church of Ireland Social Service was unlikely to diminish in the near future. She recommended that they should receive a grant from the Department of Health.

Unmarried Mothers’ Allowance

In February 1972 the Irish Times published three articles about unmarried mothers. One was titled ‘The problem now approaches major proportions’. Journalist Frank Kilfeather warned that action was necessary before the problem became ‘insurmountable’. A growing number of women were keeping their child, and support services should be developed that would enable this choice. ‘With the more liberal attitude on the unmarried mother, the homes seem to be losing their importance as places of refuge’; a growing number of women were continuing at work until the final weeks of their pregnancy. There was increasing emphasis ‘on the elimination of the stifling and suffocating secrecy and the abolition of the old-fashioned stigma and disgrace attached to having a child out of wedlock’.

Ireland became a member of the European Economic Community in January 1973. Membership was expected to result in a significant expansion in the value and range of social welfare payments, because the cost of agricultural subsidies, which was substantial, would now be borne by the EEC’s Common Agricultural Policy. A general election in February 1973 brought 16 years of Fianna Fáil governments to an end and a Fine Gael/Labour coalition took office. On the eve of the election the Irish Times submitted a series of questions about women’s rights to the main political parties. One question asked what they planned to do to help an unmarried mother who wished to keep her child. Fianna Fáil cited a response to a

100 Irish Times, 28 Nov. 1972.
101 Department of Health CCL/INA/0/478957
parliamentary question in November 1972 when the Minister for Social Welfare stated that mothers were entitled to children’s allowances, and any unmarried mother in need could apply for home assistance. The answer indicated that unmarried mothers were being considered as part of a programme to reform social assistance services, including home assistance. Labour gave a commitment to implement changes in social welfare that would enable an unmarried mother to keep her child. Fine Gael does not appear to have replied. In May 1973 Brendan Corish, Labour leader, Tánaiste and Minister of Health and Social Welfare gave a commitment to improve state assistance for the unmarried mother and her child in the forthcoming social welfare bill. An unmarried mothers’ allowance - similar to the 1970 deserted wife’s allowance - was introduced. This allowance was means-tested. A deserted wife’s benefit - which was non means-tested, and paid to deserted wives who had paid social insurance - was also introduced in 1973.

12.71 The introduction of an unmarried mothers’ allowance was met with silence in Dáil Éireann - the minister was the only person to mention it. That silence extended to the local and most national newspapers; the only references found following a word search of the Irish newspapers database (which includes many local newspapers and the main national newspapers other than The Irish Times and the Sunday Press) were a small number of government advertisements setting out changes in social welfare regulations. The family placement agency Ally, that was founded by Fergal O’Connor, reported that approximately 5% of the women placed with host families were keeping their child, and they estimated that a higher proportion of mothers that they had met, but who were not in family placements, had kept their baby. An article in the Irish Independent claimed that in Northern Ireland two-thirds of single mothers, mainly working-class mothers, kept their babies. In 1974 women who returned from Britain with their infant became eligible for unmarried mothers’ allowance; initially they could only claim the allowance if they had been resident in Ireland for two years. The introduction of a means-tested unmarried mothers’ allowance meant that single women had no incentive to seek an affiliation order against the father of their child, because any

105 Irish Independent, 4 April 1973.
106 One Family (formerly known as Cherish), administrative records.
payment would automatically result in a reduction in the unmarried mother’s allowance.\textsuperscript{107} The number of claimants rose steadily from an initially small base.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Mothers & Children \textsuperscript{108}  \\
\hline
1974 & 2,156 & 2,760  \\
1975 & 2,823 & 3,484  \\
1976 & 3,334 & 4,031  \\
1977 & 3,799 & 4,490  \\
1978 & 4,041 & 4,940  \\
1979 & 4,575 & 5,586  \\
1980 & 5,267 & 6,419  \\
1981 & 6,222 & 7,582  \\
1982 & 7,592 & 9,251  \\
1983 & 8,534 & 9,851  \\
1984 & 10,309 & 12,685  \\
1985 & 11,530 & 14,324  \\
1986 & 12,039 & 15,026  \\
1987 & 13,930 & 17,596  \\
1988 & 15,062 & 19,302  \\
1989 & 16,564 & 21,291  \\
1991 & 18,761 & 24,400  \\
1991 & 21,366 & 22,860  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The introduction of the unmarried mother’s allowance is generally assumed to have transformed the options for unmarried mothers and their children, but that transformation was not instantaneous. The silence in the Oireachtas suggests that TDs were uncertain how to respond; it does not indicate strong support for mothers who wished to keep their children. They continued to face censure from family members and neighbours, and practical difficulties, especially the inadequacy of the allowance, and difficulties in securing housing. By the 1980s the rising number of claimants was attracting some hostile commentary. \textit{Journalist Helen Shaw noted that}

\begin{quote}
Because women are trying to support themselves and their babies on the Unmarried Mother’s Allowance they are often judged by the public as social
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} James O’ Reilly, ‘Illegitimacy and the law’, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{108} Taken from Anthony McCashin, \textit{Lone parents in the Republic of Ireland. Enumeration, description and implications for social security} (Dublin, 1993), Appendix 9.
welfare parasites. Much is made of the alleged abuses within the system. Of mothers living in Corporation flats, claiming the allowance for several children, while living with the father of the children. Nobody is denying that such abuses do happen, but are they the overall reality? A social worker suggested that such abuses were ‘minimal but they are used by the public to cover-up the real problem, because they can’t face up to the situation and imagine what it’s actually like trying to support yourself and a child on £47 a week. If you are living in rented accommodation, half your allowance is gone on rent before you’ve even bought food. The truth is that people living on the allowance are on the poverty line’.

12.73 Shaw noted that no distinction was made between women who were living at home with their parents and those who were living separately, though the latter had much greater expenses. From 1977, women in rented accommodated could apply for a rent supplement from the Community Welfare Officers in the regional health board under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme (see Chapter 1) but it took some time for this supplement to be widely available. If women earned more than a tiny sum their means-tested supplement was reduced, which meant that were caught in a long-term poverty trap; added to this was the cost of nursery care. The statistics given above for the number of qualifying mothers and children refute the claim that many mothers were claiming the allowance for several children. However some conservatively-minded politicians argued that these payments constituted discrimination against married people. A former single mother who had married was very critical of the social welfare system, particularly the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, which she described as ‘degrading and had much of the “poor law” mentality about it’. Other mothers complained about the attitude of social welfare officials: especially their ‘humiliating’ efforts to check whether mothers were cohabiting.

New Support Services, family placements and voluntary organisations

12.74 Dr Dermot Walsh described family placement schemes as ‘the first real evidence of community concern for this particular problem’. He suggested that there was ‘an untapped reservoir of social concern’ that could be developed. Ally and the proposed national council were ideas that emerged from informal meetings held in
the Dominican Priory. Initially the family placement service was an ad hoc voluntary activity. Fergal O’Connor contacted friends in England in the mid-1960s asking them to shelter a pregnant single woman, and that prompted him to set up a similar scheme in Ireland. The Church of Ireland Social Services had operated a family placement scheme for some years, and one of the speakers at the Kilkenny conference had hosted pregnant women under that scheme. She explained that all host families were screened by a social worker. It was important not to make the woman feel that she was the recipient of charity. She suggested that the placement gave the woman security and shelter; the host family should help to increase her self-respect. The family should not ask questions or proffer advice, and they should have access to a social worker, if needed. If the woman had a continuing relationship with the father of her child, the host family must enable him to visit and grant them some privacy. She advised that the reaction of neighbours to their hosting a pregnant woman reflected ‘the social attitudes and prejudices of the community at large’; close questioning by neighbours must be deflected. It was important to visit the young mother in hospital after the birth; on occasion her husband had posed as the father of the new-born child. Post-natal arrangements - such as whether the mother would return to the family, with or without her baby should be agreed before the birth. The report of the Kilkenny conference emphasised that family placement could not ‘go it alone’; it should be carried out by a sponsoring agency, with professional help to hand.

Ally was constituted as a formal agency in 1971. It recruited a full-time social worker, though it remained heavily reliant on voluntary workers. Host families received no financial payment but women were expected to help with child-care and perhaps some light housework. In the 12 months 1971-72 the Ally caseload comprised 402 women; 239 were placed with private families. By 1973 over 500 families and individuals had volunteered to assist Ally, and it was placing an average of 16 women each month; at any time an estimated 40-60 women were living with host families, the majority in Dublin. Ally opened a second office that year, in the south city, in premises provided by the Eastern Health Board.

In 1973 Fergal O’Connor wrote to the Department of Health requesting financial support for three projects: a hostel for homeless girls, Ally, and the proposed

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113 Department of Health, HPO/INA/O/425641
114 Irish Independent, 2 April 1973.
116 One Family, administrative records.
national council for unmarried mothers. He explained that by placing pregnant single women with families, Ally was reducing the costs incurred by the health boards. Approximately one-quarter of the women who contacted Ally went to a mother and baby home. He wished to employ a second qualified social worker and he suggested that Ally should receive a fixed sum of £10-£20 for each woman placed with a family. The department refused to support this proposal, but suggested that he might secure funding from the health boards and they would favour such an arrangement. The department agreed to pay heating, light and phone bills for Ally's Dorset St office.

12.77 The department further informed Fergal O'Connor that the objections raised in 1971 to the proposed national council for unmarried mothers no longer existed, but they required a more complete description of the proposed council and its activities. They emphasised that ‘it must be acceptable to all religious belief [sic] in the country and also be capable of providing a service which is acceptable to the organisations already active’. This indicates that, despite the change of government, an innate deference to the wishes of the Catholic hierarchy survived. The possibility of establishing a national council rumbled on throughout the 1970s. In 1975 the Irish Independent reported that many of those working with single mothers remained concerned about the ‘inadequate services and the disjointed manner in which the services operate, and for that reason they were still trying to set up a national council’. Single mothers continued to travel to England because they were not aware of the services available in Ireland.

12.78 By 1979 only 10% of Ally clients were willing to enter a mother and baby home and the women were younger. In 1977, 70% were aged between 19-25 years; by 1979 70% were in the age-group 18-21. Ally assisted 624 pregnant women in 1984, but from that time the numbers plummeted. Ally closed in 1989, evidence of changing attitudes. Pregnant single women were increasingly staying at home and at work.

Federation of Services for the Unmarried Parent and Child

12.79 In 1974 the group of social workers who were campaigning to establish a national council for unmarried mothers published a directory of services available in Ireland.
in conjunction with the Medico-Social Research Board, of which Dr Walsh was a member. They continued to highlight the need for an organisation to co-ordinate these services.\textsuperscript{121} Women’s Choice noted that until the publication of this directory, unmarried mothers had no means of discovering their entitlements or the services that were available. The directory brought the problems of single mothers ‘more into the open’.\textsuperscript{122}

12.80 The inaugural meeting of the proposed Federation of Services for Single Parents and their Children, which was the title originally proposed, was held in November 1975. The objective was to promote the welfare of single parents and their children and to supply and co-ordinate information on the existing services. The federation was given office space by the Eastern Health Board.\textsuperscript{123} When the Catholic bishops announced plans to establish CURAM (sic) as an agency to assist single mothers, the federation urged the Department of Health to ensure that CURAM would not be permitted to impede or diminish health board support for the federation.\textsuperscript{124} Department officials recommended that the minister should urge health boards to provide financial support for the federation, which was providing an essential, non-denominational service for unmarried mothers and children and for people who encountered these mothers and children ‘sometimes in circumstances of acute desperation’. If CURAM ‘gets off the ground’ it would be acting in consort with the federation but the two organisations might be competing for funding. The official who wrote this memorandum added that, ‘My personal approach is coloured by the impression that many pregnant girls who flee their homes are refugees from clerical wrath as much as from parental distress and the strictures of local society’.\textsuperscript{125} The department awarded a grant to the federation, and it recommended that all the health boards should make a contribution proportionate to their size (CURA is discussed later).

12.81 By 1978 the membership of the Federation of Services for the Unmarried Parent and Child included the Dublin maternity hospitals; Pelletstown and Bessborough; five of the seven health boards; the social services councils in Kilkenny, Limerick and Sligo; many adoption agencies including CPRSI and St Patrick’s Guild and voluntary organisations such as Ally, Cherish and Barnardo’s. The federation was chaired by Dr Dermot Walsh. The theme of their 1978 conference was ‘Finding
parents for children with special needs'; in 1979, it was 'The unmarried parent - working towards the best decision'. By 1979 the federation was handling a significant number of inquiries from social workers, community welfare officers and GPs. Federation staff had established contacts with health board community care officers, Dublin Corporation housing officers and others who worked with single mothers and children. They produced quarterly information brochures and papers on topics such as adoption and 'illegitimacy'.

12.82 When they met the Department of Health in 1978, the department claimed that the federation was a less significant source of information than anticipated, partly because of the emergence of CURA, and the postponement of the federation's planned advertising campaign and lack of walk-in offices. However the department acknowledged that it was assuming greater importance as a forum where organisations working with single mothers met and exchanged views, and it facilitated liaison between statutory and non-statutory bodies. The Central Council of Catholic Adoption Agencies was working with the federation. By 1982 there were 40 member organisations. The health boards remained the primary source of funding but the budget remained tight, as did public funding for Cherish. The 1980s was a decade of economic depression, and these services, like other public services, had to contend with budgetary stringency in the Department of Health and the health boards.126 The federation and some of its members, notably Cherish and Ally, were active in campaigns to abolish the status of 'illegitimacy' - see Chapter 32.

Cherish

12.83 Cherish, an organisation for one-parent families, was founded in October 1972 by two single mothers, Maura O'Dea and Colette O'Neill. It may have been inspired by Gingerbread, a self-help organisation for one-parent families established in England in 1970. By 1973 there were 70 Gingerbread groups in Britain and one in Belfast. Gingerbread provided support, advice and information for one-parent families. They were unwilling to extend their reach into Ireland because the differences in health and welfare services would complicate their operations.127 Cherish was established by and for single mothers as a mutual-support group and a lobby for better provisions for mothers wishing to keep their child. They advertised their existence in Woman's Way in March 1973.128 In 1973 Cherish

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126 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/481800: 1987 budgetary pressures on health boards.
128 One Family, administrative records.
became a limited company with Senator Mary Robinson as President. William Duncan, one of the three Commissioners of this Commission and an authority on family law, played a key role ‘in their development and politicisation’.  

12.84 Cherish promoted the acceptance of single pregnant women in Irish society, arguing that this would enable them to make a realistic choice about the future of their child. They demanded the introduction of a lump-sum grant, which would not be means-tested, and a change in the laws to make it easier to secure maintenance payments from the fathers and a higher maximum affiliation payment. They campaigned for changes in the language used when dealing with ‘illegitimacy’ - they preferred the term ‘natural child’; they also campaigned for changes in the law on ‘illegitimacy’ and the legal rights of ‘illegitimate’ children, including inheritance rights.

12.85 By 1974 they had employed a social worker and made contact with the Departments of Health, Social Welfare and Justice, and the Eastern Health Board. They publicised their existence through health centres, social workers and clergy. The Eastern Health Board determined that Cherish provided ‘acceptable alternative services’ for unmarried mothers and children to those provided by the EHB and they should be awarded a grant of £1,000. By 1975 Cherish was operating from offices in Pembroke Street, employing two social workers and an administrator who took responsibility for fund-raising. They had been given a house that was used to accommodate mothers and children.

12.86 The EHB cited the large number of Irish single women travelling to England for abortion because of social attitudes as an argument for grant-aiding Cherish. However Cherish based their case for funding and legal reform on the equal rights of all children. Concern about the number of Irish women seeking abortions in England may also have prompted the 1974 statement by the Irish Hierarchy on Family Law Reform, which Cherish claimed ‘goes a long way in supporting our proposals for legal reform’. The gap between income and expenditure in Cherish rose steadily during the mid-1980s. In the years 1988-93 Cherish received £20,000 annually from public resources, which later rose to £25,000; this

130 Margaret Murphy, ‘Cherish – its formation, aims and policy’ - Paper read by Margaret Murphy, Secretary of Cherish (Oct. 1974).
132 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482353.
amounted to 40-45% of total expenditure. Cherish received its first grant from the newly-established National Lottery in 1988 (£10,000). They also secured small grants from the Minister of State for Children.

12.87 From the mid-1970s Cherish became a regular contact point for all who wanted to learn more about single mothers. Their leaflets were in high demand from public libraries, social workers in maternity hospitals, public health nurses and women’s networks. They raised awareness of the realities of life for single mothers. The correspondence and social worker files show the diverse range of queries that they handled. One mother asked whether she should adopt her son. Another, who had falsely registered her child as ‘legitimate’ wanted to change this, so that she could claim unmarried mothers’ allowance. Cherish advised mothers on their entitlements to social welfare, how to apply for equipment and furniture from the home assistance officer (known as community welfare officer from 1977) or apply for unmarried mothers’ allowance. Women were advised that it was important to put a father’s name on the birth certificate, though that could only be done with his consent and would not affect the child’s succession rights. A mother looking for work was advised not to tell her employer about her baby ‘until you have got the job and proved you can do it. Then tell them’. Letters were forwarded to Cherish by the Gay Byrne Radio Show and women’s magazines. They received letters from religious sisters who were seeking assistance for a pregnant woman; one woman mentioned that her personnel manager had advised her to contact them.

12.88 While Cherish helped and encouraged women to keep their children, they also warned mothers of the difficulties that they would face. The mother of a second child, whose parents had adopted her first child, had placed this child for adoption, because her parents were unable to take her/him; she was now reconsidering her plans for adoption. Cherish told her that ‘it is very difficult to keep the baby. First of all you have to find accommodation for yourself and a nursery to place the baby in during the day, then you would have to get a good job to support yourself and the baby’.

12.89 They provided mothers with prams and other essential equipment, as well as advice on securing accommodation and crèche places, both of which were extremely difficult. Seventeen of the 74 callers to the office over four weeks in April-May 1974 were seeking accommodation, 11 were facilitated. Twelve callers

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had a ‘general discussion’; three were parents of pregnant daughters. Miss Clandillon, an inspector in the Department of Health, with responsibility for boarded out children and unmarried mothers, commented that the above list showed that Cherish was meeting ‘a great need’; she recommended that the department should pay the £1,000 grant recommended by the EHB. But for some time the Cherish grant question was sent by the EHB to the Department of Health, and by the Department of Health to the EHB; both parties avoided a financial commitment. 135

12.90 Cherish operated as part of a network of services for unmarried mothers. In 1975 a list of 61 ‘specific referrals’ - presumably where Cherish made contact on behalf of a client - included 12 to Ally; 12 to mother and baby homes; 11 to legal services; five to adoption agencies; six to day-care providers; five to the National Rehabilitation Board. Ally referred 22 clients to Cherish; hospitals referred 22, health boards 19; adoption agencies 15, mother and baby homes 15, family members 28; family planning clinics six, clergy one. 136

12.91 In 1977 one woman who had sought advice from Cherish wrote later and said that she had gone to Pelletstown: ‘I found it very nice and they were most helpful to me when I needed their support’. She planned to keep her baby and was contacting Cherish seeking a cot and the address of her nearest branch. When Cherish contacted one woman from a provincial town telling her that they had arranged for her to be admitted to Pelletstown she replied:

I am very glad to hear the good news. I will be glad to go to St Patrick’s Home and to stay there until the baby is born. I will be very glad of the company even though I hope I won’t have to stay that long...please let me know as I want to tell my parents I am going to the Civil Service.

12.92 A woman who went to Dunboyne wrote that she had been there for two weeks and ‘likes it very much’; another woman in Dunboyne said that it ‘really is nice and the nuns are very understanding’, however a third complained that there were too many rules and regulations, ‘it is like boarding school’. Another client referred to mother and baby homes as ‘those dreadful places’. Women who sought information about abortion were referred to Open Door Counselling. A woman who was placing her child for adoption wanted to talk to somebody about ‘what to
expect within myself after the adoption’. She had sought advice from St Patrick’s Guild ‘but they just keep telling me to leave it all in God’s hands’.

12.93 The growing number of professional social workers who were working with unmarried mothers removed many of the religious/ideological barriers that had existed in the past to such cross-agency referrals. Journalist Mary Kenny suggested that Cherish had been enormously effective as a pressure group; its influence had resulted in an increase in affiliation rates, in the unmarried mothers’ allowance, and a fall in the adoption rate from 94% to 50%, though other factors - national and international - were also driving these trends.

12.94 The financial difficulties that single mothers faced were a recurrent theme in the Cherish files of the 1970s and 1980s. The cost of child care and accommodation made it difficult for them to return to work. Cherish received pleas for support from mothers who were in debt, from mothers who wanted money to buy Christmas presents for their children and mothers who had borrowed money (perhaps from a money lender) and were unable to repay it. Many women commented on how unfair it was that the father of their child had a well-paid job and lived in some comfort, whereas they were living in penury. One woman acknowledged that she did not love the father of her child but would marry him ‘in order to secure a name for herself and the baby’. A Cherish worker described one putative father as ‘supportive’; he intended to marry his girlfriend ‘but not because of baby’. Cherish referred one woman, who was planning to marry, to a marriage counsellor because the social worker believed that she wanted ‘the false security of a wedding ring’. In 1983 one 17-year-old, who wished to marry her boyfriend ‘as soon as possible’, was refused permission by her local priest and was trying to get approval from the bishop. Yet several women were determined not to marry. One woman, who had married the father of her child while pregnant, was seeking advice about ‘getting out’ of the marriage.

12.95 Housing was the most pressing need among the mothers who contacted Cherish. One woman who was living in a flat in Dublin had to leave when it became obvious that she was pregnant. Many single mothers were living in squalid, damp accommodation; several were in squats. Cherish informed one mother who was looking for accommodation that it was difficult ‘as landlords are prejudiced against children’. At that time there was no legislation to prevent such discrimination. One

137 *Sunday Independent*, 7 Nov. 1976.
pregnant woman was fearful that her landlord would throw her out because he had already done that to another pregnant tenant. A letter from Cherish to Dublin Corporation housing section reported that one woman who had been evicted from her flat had suffered ‘continual harassment because of her child’.

12.96 By 1976 Cherish was accommodating six one-parent families in flatlets at Newlands’ Cross - most remained for short periods until long-term housing was secured. Some years later they ran a shared house for mothers and their children in Dundrum. They helped mothers with babies to find private accommodation. When Cherish met the Minister for Health and Social Welfare in 1977 they highlighted the need to increase the rent supplement when calculating welfare payments, given the high rents in Dublin. In 1980 housing was the primary concern of 53% of first-time callers. Almost half of those seeking housing were living with their parents. A follow-up study of 130 callers showed that only 12% were now living with relatives; 24% were in privately-rented accommodation, 22% with voluntary organisations, 8% in Dublin Corporation housing, 7% in Regina Coeli, 6% cohabiting; 14% had secured live-in employment.138

12.97 In 1978 the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children sent a questionnaire on housing to member agencies. The 18 agencies that replied reported that 184 clients had sought assistance with housing over a four-week period. The majority were pregnant women; 63% were leaving the family home; 24% were leaving privately-rented accommodation. The federation commented on the low instance of forward planning by mothers. Most agencies helping with housing were in Dublin, but more than half of their clients came from outside Dublin - so the pattern of pregnant single women coming to Dublin, which was identified in the 1920s, continued. The federation concluded that there was ‘a high incidence of housing breakdown’, when a single woman became pregnant.139 Regina Coeli continued to house significant numbers of mothers and children, though the quality of accommodation was poor - some viewed it as a means of fast-tracking access to local authority housing.

12.98 In 1980 a Cherish social worker commented that many women were so desperate to find accommodation that they were often forced to take ‘anything they can get no matter how bad or expensive’. Most local authorities gave priority to married

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138 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/489154.
139 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482721.
couples with children and they took the number of children into consideration when allocating houses, so a single mother with one child ranked far below a two-parent family with four or more children. The social worker described Dublin Corporation as ‘probably the most enlightened authority in the country. On their books a single mother and child are given the same number of points as a married couple with a child, which means that there is no discrimination towards the single parent’. A number of local authorities had adopted a similar policy, but the practice was not uniform. She claimed that for a mother and child to live with her parents was successful in only a small percentage of cases:

There are obviously some caring and enlightened parents, but many others, while allowing the girl and her child a roof over their heads, are anything but understanding and tolerant. There is often bad feeling if the girl goes out in the evening, so because of this and because of a guilt feeling, many single mothers never really have a life of their own. Others become far too dependent on the family support and are afraid to venture out on their own, despite the fact that often this is the best solution. Relationships can become very strained and problems that may appear petty to outsiders can loom very large in the family life.

She claimed that many arrangements where mother and baby lived with a family exploited the woman, because the family was only looking for cheap labour.\(^\text{140}\)

12.99 In 1975, over 20% of applicants on the Dublin Corporation housing list, 30% in Co Dublin and 20% in Cork city were one-parent families (deserted and separated wives and single mothers). By the 1980s there is evidence of some advances in meeting their housing needs. Dublin Corporation regarded women who were in Pelletstown and who otherwise qualified for housing (for example, had been resident in Dublin) as ‘homeless’ which gave them priority on the list.\(^\text{141}\) Applications from two-parent families with children were falling. The birth rate in two-parent families had fallen; there was renewed emigration and local authority housing lists were much shorter than in the past. Gingerbread – A UK single-parent support group – formed a co-operative housing group with a view to building houses for one-parent families in Ireland and in the early 1980s the National Association of Building Co-Operatives contacted Cherish suggesting that they become involved in co-operative housing schemes.\(^\text{142}\)

\(^{140}\) *Woman’s Way*, 2 May 1980.

\(^{141}\) Pelletstown discovery

\(^{142}\) Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482591.
12.100 Several schemes, supported by the health boards, had emerged that provided short-term housing for single mothers and their infants, often with social workers on site to provide advice and assistance. Miss Carr’s Home, a long-established charity for Protestant children, opened eight flatlets in Northbrook Road with a nursery attached, where mothers could stay for up to one year. Mothers were usually referred by social workers in the Eastern Health Board, Ally, Cherish and other organisations (see Chapter 25). Denny House, Belmont flatlets and Miss Carr’s Northbrook Road flatlets also accommodated mothers and children when they left a maternity hospital.

12.101 When Cherish met the Minister of State for Women’s Affairs and Family Law, Nuala Fennell, in 1983 they complained that single mothers were often offered accommodation ‘in particularly disadvantaged areas of Dublin often very far from their families’. However both parties agreed that it was virtually impossible for single mothers to get local authority housing outside Dublin, which meant that mothers tended to move to the city. They noted that there was a need for greater co-ordination between the Department of Health (which supported programmes for single parents) and the Department of the Environment. Singled Out, a pamphlet published by Cherish in 1983, claimed that homelessness was a constant threat for single mothers. It recommended changes in local authority housing policy: more units for smaller families and the abolition of restrictive residency requirements (i.e. that a person must have lived in the locality for some time before they were eligible to apply for local authority housing). It acknowledged that Dublin Corporation made efforts to house unmarried mothers, but they often ended up in ‘what have been termed the Corporation’s transit camps, areas of Corporation housing which gradually become filled with “problem” cases’, such as Ballymun.

**Mother and baby homes in a changing environment**

12.102 In 1970, 43% of the 1,708 ‘illegitimate’ births were to mothers in the major mother and baby homes. By 1980 the number of births had more than doubled to 3,691 but less than 15% were associated with mother and baby homes. By 1990 when the number of births had risen to 8,766, only 2% were to women in mother and baby homes. A significant number of women continued to be admitted to mother...
and baby homes in the mid-1970s though they were a declining proportion of unmarried mothers. In the 1980s there was a substantial fall in the occupancy of mother and baby homes and they increasingly cared for specific categories of unmarried mothers: students, or women with special needs, addiction issues or difficult family circumstances. The denominational divisions that were deeply embedded in Irish mother and baby services disappeared, and the surviving homes, supervised flatlets and other facilities were accessed by women regardless of religion.

12.103 In the early 1970s there were four mother and baby homes: Bessborough, Pelletstown, Dunboyne and Denny House, which was still known as the Magdalen Asylum and exclusively for Protestant women. The 1970s was the first time that mother and baby homes were subjected to public criticism, some of it from former residents. This happened, paradoxically at a time when conditions were improving - but arguably not sufficiently fast to meet changing demands and perceptions. In 1973 the Sunday Independent reported claims by a former Bessborough mother that the food was inadequate, medical care was minimal and there was a lack of recreational facilities.\textsuperscript{146} The chair of the Southern Health Board described these allegations as ‘grossly unfair’, but we have no evidence that he visited the home and spoke with the women. The sister in charge claimed that they were totally without foundation. In addition to breakfast, the diet included a full lunch and a tea consisting of a fry or cold meats or salads. The women had tea and biscuits, bread and butter or cake at 10am, 3.30pm and 9pm. There was a plentiful supply of fruit when in season from the community’s orchards. A gynaecologist called every morning, and they had the services of two ‘top paediatricians’ and a GP. One sister described communication between the girls and the staff as ‘frank and open and above all sympathetic’. The editor of the Sunday Independent claimed that they had received a number of letters from former Bessborough residents, including one signed by five women, praising the ‘kindness, love, care and attention’ which ‘they would never be able to forget’; other former inmates also rejected the allegations.\textsuperscript{147} Several witnesses who were in Bessborough around that time and who gave sworn testimony to the Commission described the food as adequate; some suggested that it was similar to boarding-school fare, and there is independent evidence from contemporary inspections that Bessborough had recreation rooms and a television, so the assertions of this woman, who apparently

\textsuperscript{146} The Commission has failed to identify this story.  
\textsuperscript{147} Sunday Independent, 8 July 1973.
spent only five days in Bessborough (perhaps in the maternity hospital, where there wouldn’t have been any recreation facilities), are open to question. What is significant is that she chose to speak out - that would not have happened in earlier times.

12.104 In 1974 Dr Dermot Walsh highlighted four priorities in services for unmarried mothers: smaller mother and baby homes; group homes for mothers and children; housing requirements in general; crèches, nursery facilities operated by trained child-care workers, and adequate social work providing guidance, advice and support for single mothers - including the organisation of mutual self-help support for unmarried mothers and their children.\footnote{Walsh in Cherish ‘Conference on ‘The Unmarried parent and child in Irish society’, p. 42.} Dr Walsh’s criticism of large mother and baby homes was not new, but it was now given a more scientific edge, given his concerns for the psychological well-being of pregnant single women. In 1974 a department inspector complained that mothers in Bessborough had no privacy. By 1974 the dormitories had been replaced by individual cubicles, and there were improvements to bathrooms and other facilities. Pelletstown, another old institution, underwent similar improvements. In 1974, apparently for the first time, the department’s inspector spoke to eight women individually about their experience in Bessborough. (It is unclear how they were selected). She reported that ‘all spoke highly of conditions in general and in particular expressed much appreciation of the work of the community: their understanding of their problems and efforts to iron out difficulties’. In the case of four of these women, neither parent was aware of her pregnancy; the mother of two women was aware, so presumably were both parents of the remaining two women. The women expressed minor criticisms - lack of bath cleaning materials and under-heated dormitories - but the inspector pointed out that there was a nationwide shortage of fuel oil, and economies were necessary; the infant nurseries were adequately heated. The heating shortage was not specific to a mother and baby home.\footnote{Department of Health INACT/INA/0/463707} In 1982 Woman’s Way quoted a woman who had given birth in Bessborough: ‘everybody was fantastic…I felt very secure...They did not want me to keep the baby, but as soon as he was born he became important to me and it didn’t seem right to put him up for adoption. He was my responsibility’.\footnote{Woman’s Way, 17 Dec. 1982.}
12.105 The average length of stay fell sharply during the 1960s, though most women remained until their infant was placed for adoption. By the 1970s mothers were no longer required to remain until their infant left the home. In 1975 the Mother Superior explained that ‘For the past year or two the scene has changed very fast’. Because abortion was now available in Britain they decided that mothers should be discharged as soon as they were medically fit to leave after the birth - six to 12 days. Babies remained in the home until the mother determined whether she would keep her child or place the baby for adoption; by 1981 babies stayed for four-five weeks on average. In 1983 the average length of stay for women in Pelletstown was just under nine weeks.

12.106 If a woman planned to keep her child, Bessborough would keep the infant until she had arranged accommodation. Most women entered a home only during the final weeks of pregnancy or the immediate post-partum days, so they were no longer carrying out any significant work. Bessborough had to recruit nursery nurses to care for the infants, at a time when wages/salaries were rising sharply, as were non-pay costs. The Mother Superior conceded that ‘if the girls are to be prevented from going to England for abortion there must be something to offer them’. Staffing levels were considerably higher than in the past, though she claimed that they were not adequate. In 1975 there were five midwives; two at night and three during the day; one SRN for night or day duty, plus one auxiliary during the day in the maternity hospital. There were eight SRNs in the home, two full-time and one part-time auxiliary, plus paid domestic staff in the kitchen and laundry in addition to the Sisters. The number of women joining religious orders had fallen significantly and many were leaving religious life, so Bessborough was increasingly dependent on lay staff - which further increased the costs because the Sisters did not receive a salary, in contrast to Pelletstown where they were local authority employees. When the Department of Health inspector visited Bessborough in 1978 the weather was warm and sunny. She reported that ‘From what I could observe the “girls” took full advantage and spent most of the day sun-bathing. They give little, if any assistance in routine work. The staff are hard at it full-time’; she believed that staff numbers were not adequate for the work involved.
12.107 Large mother and baby homes were increasingly uneconomic because of falling occupancy. Short stays meant that a home could be full one week, and almost empty two weeks later. Rising costs, coupled with falling occupancy (and double-digit inflation) meant that capitation grants were rising steadily, yet finances showed little improvement. The Sisters were pressing to be paid salaries; the Mother Superior claimed that Bessborough was being subsidised by the congregation. A department inspector noted that the order was performing a vital role, and unless steps were taken to provide them with adequate salaries the home might close, adding 'this would create unsurmountable difficulties for the Heath Boards in finding care and accommodation for young unmarried mothers'.

12.108 In 1978 a social worker in Cherish sent a note about current needs of single mothers to the chair of the Magdalen Asylum/Denny House. Greater tolerance on the part of families meant that more women remained at home during pregnancy; others opted for family placements. The improved social welfare provisions meant that mothers had some choice about future arrangements for their child, but this had resulted in 'new areas of need' such as day nursery places and housing for mothers and children, temporary accommodation immediately after the birth and long-term housing. She suggested that the Magdalen Asylum could provide temporary accommodation for mothers and infants immediately after the birth; many mothers had to place their infants in residential care because they had nowhere to go, which disrupted the bonding between mother and infant. They could also provide emergency accommodation for mothers and babies from the country who often arrived at the Cherish offices with nowhere to live. She also suggested that they should consider extending their facilities to women of all Christian denominations; its mission since the eighteenth century was confined to Protestant women.

12.109 Miss Clandillon visited this home in 1979 to discuss possible changes, and the trustees appear to have kept the department informed of their plans. The Magdalen Asylum changed its name to Denny House, honouring Lady Arabella Denny, their eighteenth-century founder, and amended its charter to enable them to admit unmarried mothers without religious restriction, and, in certain circumstances, married women who were separated from their husband, deserted,

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155 Department of Health, INACT/INA/0/538770.
156 One Family, administrative records, 1980.
157 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482129.
wives, and pregnant widows. The numbers rose significantly following these changes. By the early 1980s women were being admitted to Denny House in the final weeks of pregnancy. They gave birth in a Dublin maternity hospital—presumably the hospital of their choice, because returns show no consistent pattern. They returned with the baby and remained for approximately three months. Social workers in the Dublin maternity hospital referred mothers who needed time and space to determine their future arrangements or needing support in developing parenting skills. Other women spent their time in Denny House resolving their relationship with their parents or the father of their child (see Chapter 23). During this time mothers were expected to decide whether to keep the baby and make arrangements for their future. They were required to take responsibility for their baby while in the home—as part of the process of making them aware of the demands of motherhood. When Denny House staff met Augusta McCabe, the department’s social work adviser, they cited several instances where young women, who had planned to keep their baby, changed their mind ‘when faced with the reality of caring for the small baby’, and contrary cases where women who had planned on adoption also changed their minds. By 1982 Denny House which only accommodated ten women at any time, had a waiting list.

Miss Carr’s Children’s Home, a long-established charity for Protestant children, was increasingly providing accommodation for the children of separated parents and single mothers; some children were maintained by local health authorities. Miss Carr’s aimed to keep mother and children together and would occasionally permit the mother to live in the home with her child(ren). In 1972 they bought a house adjoining the children’s home that they planned to turn into flats for deserted wives/unmarried mothers and their children and they applied to the EHB for a grant to cover part of the cost. The concept of a health authority giving financial support to a voluntary organisation that provided housing for deserted wives or unmarried mothers and their children was a ‘new development’, though the EHB had been provided with some flats by Inter-Aid, which they used as supervised accommodation for unmarried mothers who were keeping their child. The Department of Health was broadly supportive of these initiatives, noting that they

158 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482129.
159 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482129.
160 Department of Health, CCP/IMP/0/45687.
were in line with the Council of Europe resolution and accommodation would be available on a ‘non-denominational basis’.\textsuperscript{161}

12.111 The Eastern Health Board held an Open Day in Pelletstown in 1981 to introduce social workers and others working with unmarried mothers to the new matron and to discuss new social work arrangements.\textsuperscript{162} It would have been unimaginable even ten years earlier to hold such an Open Day. Pelletstown, which was described as ‘an old rambling building’ and a ‘fire risk’, had capacity for 100 women, but there were only 37 residents. At this time Pelletstown was primarily used to accommodate children with special needs. The EHB considered demolishing the large building and replacing it with flatlets designed to accommodate mothers and babies.\textsuperscript{163} In 1982 the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and Children announced that a study of mother and baby homes was underway in the EHB region to determine the views of social workers as to the benefits and shortcomings of the homes. They noted that ‘the response from the social workers was poor’.\textsuperscript{164}

12.112 A handwritten page dated January 1979 in a Department of Health file noted that at a recent meeting of the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children ‘reservations were expressed at the level of obstetrical care’ provided in mother and baby homes.\textsuperscript{165} The maternity unit at Pelletstown closed in 1980. Doctors had wished to close it for some time, but some members of the EHB believed that it enabled women to keep their pregnancy a secret; the doctors were concerned about the quality of care and potential risks to mother and baby. In 1981 the senior health officer at the Department of Health expressed concerns about ‘the high level of risk’ in Bessborough births. He described five stillbirths and two infant deaths in a total of 307 births as ‘very high’. He questioned whether the service was adequate and whether the women received adequate antenatal care.\textsuperscript{166} By 1981 approximately two-thirds of women admitted to Bessborough were giving birth there. The Department was investigating the desirability of ending deliveries in Bessborough.\textsuperscript{167} The matter was referred to the SHB; they reported that the perinatal mortality among Bessborough infants - whether they

\textsuperscript{161} Department of Health, CCP/IMP/0/45687.  
\textsuperscript{162} One Family, administrative records, 1981.  
\textsuperscript{163} Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/488268  
\textsuperscript{164} Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/481800, Federation AGM, 7 May 1982.  
\textsuperscript{165} Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482721.  
\textsuperscript{166} Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/488268.  
\textsuperscript{167} Department of Health, FIN2/EST/0/543210.
were delivered in the home or in St Finbarr’s Hospital - was double the national average. The director of community care had investigated the stillbirths and concluded that little could have been done; two neonatal deaths were due to gross deformity, one of these infants was extremely premature. The SHB acknowledged that ‘the position of this unit in the overall obstetrical service’ should be considered. The director of community care had investigated the stillbirths and concluded that little could have been done; two neonatal deaths were due to gross deformity, one of these infants was extremely premature. The SHB acknowledged that ‘the position of this unit in the overall obstetrical service’ should be considered. No decision was taken. In 1985 a senior SHB official raised questions about obstetrical care in Bessborough. A handwritten note on a Department of Health file claimed that a nun/midwife had contacted the Board privately about discontinuing deliveries. The Department commented that

For the unmarried girls who reside in ‘mother and baby homes’ and their babies, pregnancy and delivery carry a much higher than average degree of risk and this is particularly so during the perinatal period…To continue to carry out deliveries of this high risk group in a non-consultant staffed unit, funded by a health board, would appear to be contrary to the Department’s clear policy on deliveries.

12.113 The general hospitals division wished to discontinue births in Bessborough ‘in the light of the overwhelming medical opinion and evidence re non-consultant staffed units’. Shortly after this report the Southern Health Board confirmed that Bessborough had agreed to discontinue deliveries.

12.114 By 1983 the facilities provided for unmarried mothers and their babies in Bessborough, Dunboyne, Pelletstown, Denny House and Miss Carr’s were costing £1.5m in public funds. Bessborough was the only home that provided maternity care. An official in the Department of Health commented that ‘Actually, the homes have a social function only, serving as a refuge for unmarried mothers and their children and providing them with counselling and accommodation during the later months of pregnancy and for a short time after delivery’. In the final years many of the women in Pelletstown and Dunboyne were referred by CURA. By the mid-1980s the occupancy rate at Pelletstown at certain times was only 10%.

12.115 In 1983 a social worker wrote a report of her experiences with women who were admitted to Pelletstown. She had been under the impression that women would only be admitted following conversations with a social worker, and that the social

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168 Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/488268.
169 Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/488258.
170 Pelletstown Discovery E 11
worker would retain contact with the woman while she was in Pelletstown. Having interviewed all the women when they arrived in Pelletstown her overall impression is of minimal contact and a marked resistance on the part of the women to maintain the contact or travel outside the Home for office interviews. The young woman hiding from family and community often fears meeting a friend or neighbour...Patterns of institutionalisation with its apathy and dependency can be observed within a week of admission...The women often view contact with Social Worker as upsetting and will avoid such contact denying the need to plan for the expected child.

12.116 Only 40 of the 177 women came from the Eastern Health Board area, which indicated that ‘a flight to the city’ continued. Many woman had made hasty decisions on discovering that they were pregnant, abandoning jobs at a time of high unemployment, without being aware of their entitlements to maternity leave; dropping out of school or college ‘in a similar, hasty unplanned way’. Some women needed education on the ‘biological facts of life’; she claimed that there was ‘a marked level of ignorance amongst the women who did not avail of ante-natal classes at hospital’. She noted that ‘Moral dilemmas and legal requirements do, however, emerge in assessing how some handicapped girls will parent their child either in the short or long term. There is not in my opinion sufficient recognition of the fact that some mothers require long term semi-sheltered accommodation if the child is to receive adequate care and protection’. Pelletstown had lots of vacant space, so anybody who applied was admitted, but ‘Obviously a smaller unit will have to select criteria’.

12.117 In 1985 the Eastern Health Board purchased a house on Eglinton Road, as the successor to Pelletstown. They asked the Sisters who had been running Pelletstown to take charge. Eglinton House accommodated a maximum of 13 women and 10 babies; all the women were referred by social workers. The focus was on enabling mothers and children to move to independent living arrangements. Mothers often moved into flatlets in nearby Belmont Avenue (see Chapter 14).

12.118 A 1986 Department of Health file that reviewed current and future provisions for unmarried mothers and their children commented that

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171 Pelletstown Discovery E 11
CHAPTER 12 UNMARRIED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN 1960S-1998

It is not known how the girls managed in the homes before and after pregnancy but there is a conventional wisdom that they had to perform ‘penitential work’, e.g. laundering and other domestic work. Presumably this was, in part at least, an act of atonement for the grave wrong they had perpetrated against the pristine society of saints and scholars.

12.119 Minister of Health, Barry Desmond, agreed that officials should examine the possibility of closing St Clare’s children’s home in Stamullen, Temple Hill Children’s Hospital, the Nazareth home at Fahan (Donegal) and Bessborough. When the department contacted the North Eastern and Southern Health Boards to discuss this proposal, their ‘response was less than ecstatic’ despite the fact that closing Bessborough would release £500,000 for child care and family services within the Southern Health Board; closing Stamullen give the North Eastern Health Board £120,000 for similar purposes. The department emphasised that this was not a cost-saving exercise; the savings would be used to develop child and family services in the community, including support services for single-parent families. The Southern Health Board official told the department that the Sacred Hearts congregation had raised the question of Bessborough’s future with the board, and they had indicated a wish to continue working with children. At this time Bessborough accommodated 18 pregnant women, nine mothers with babies and five babies without their mothers. It was staffed by ten nurses - six Sisters, four lay - ten domestics and two non-nursing Sisters. The SHB official said it was ‘basically operating as a small acute hospital with sick patients’, which was a strange description, especially as it no longer provided maternity care. The Southern Health Board indicated that it would use the resources freed by closing Bessborough to hire additional social workers, develop flatlets for single mothers and day-care centres in Cork city, and provide additional resources for fostering and parenting courses for mothers. Closing Bessborough would take time; it would take time to identify alternative activities for the congregation and the premises.172 In the early 1980s Bessborough introduced AnCo173 training courses for the women. The Southern Health Board was concerned that some women were staying for unduly long periods presumably to attend these courses.174 Some mothers were helped to move into flats in Cork with their babies.

172 Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/488268.
173 The State training agency; later called FÁS.
174 Department of Health, CCL/INA/0/488268.
While Bessborough and Pelletstown had very low occupancy rates, in 1981 the occupancy rate in Dunboyne was 'very high' and it remained high in the early and mid-1980s. Dunboyne continued to offer the best facilities, and the smaller scale made it less daunting for mothers. A doctor who visited it during the 1980s described it as 'chintzy'. There were a total of 29 beds in single rooms, cubicles and bedrooms for two, three and four women (the latter had a bathroom attached). There was a TV room, a smoke room, a record room and two parlours for visitors. Staffing for the approximately 30 young women consisted of five religious - one midwife, one children's nurse, one social worker, one administrator, one receptionist; two cooks, one domestic worker, a gardener and eight part-time teachers. By 1989 roughly half of the Dunboyne residents were aged from 14 to 18. Most of these teenagers spent their time studying for school examinations, and they often arrived relatively early in pregnancy; older women arrived later in pregnancy. In addition to classes for younger women, some of the women carried out light work for external companies - assembling the contents of board games, and sorting papers for large meetings, for which they were paid a piece-rate; and there were lectures on diet and personal care. In 1989, at a meeting between the Department of Health and the North-Eastern Health Board, the latter expressed the view that Dunboyne and its service were outdated, but any proposal to close the home should come from the Sisters. The Sisters were examining the possibility of replacing it with two smaller homes - one catering for students and women under 18 years and a second for other women. These homes should be in a city, close to a maternity hospital. The department recommended that Dunboyne should remain in operation as a 'stop gap measure', until alternative arrangements were agreed. The official noted a 'need to move quickly on this before it becomes a political issue'.

Dunboyne began the process of closing in late 1990. CURA and Bishop O'Mahony claimed that the health boards were not aware of the full demand for mother and baby homes, because many women preferred to seek support from church-based services. When the department met the bishop and CURA, they claimed that there was a continuing need for a place such as Dunboyne. They also claimed that the Good Shepherd Sisters came under pressure from the North Eastern Health Board to close Dunboyne, whereas the health board claimed that the Sisters had initiated the discussion. When the Department contacted the health boards about the impact of closing Dunboyne, they indicated that it had not presented any difficulties. All but one of the senior social workers reported that
there was little demand for Dunboyne. Women who wished to leave their home area when pregnant were accommodated with CURA families; the Midland Health Board planned to recruit ‘host families’ for women who would previously have been sent to Dunboyne. The South Eastern Health Board highlighted the problem of pregnant teenagers dropping out of secondary school, suggesting that further research was needed on that topic. The Eastern Health Board reported that the numbers admitted to Denny House had increased, and suggested that this might be due to the closure of Dunboyne. It was reported that CURA in Limerick were developing a hostel to fill the gap created by closing Dunboyne. Denny House closed in 1994. Bessborough, the first mother and baby home to open in the Irish Free State, was the last to close - in 1999.

**Changing Attitudes?**

12.122 In 1972 the sociologist and Catholic priest Micheál MacGréil, published a detailed report on Irish attitudes on a variety of social issues. He reported that only 3% of respondents agreed that ‘the unmarried mother should pay for her sin’. There was strong agreement that ‘children born out of wedlock should be treated the same as those born in marriage’. These findings would appear to suggest that prejudice against single mothers and their children had disappeared. However there is evidence that, while attitudes were changing, the transformation was less radical than MacGréil suggests. In 1971 June Levine wrote about Northern Ireland civil rights activist and MP Bernadette Devlin, who was a single mother. She described Devlin as ‘a liberated woman’. Levine contrasted Bernadette Devlin with an unmarried friend who had kept her baby and was struggling, unable to cope; she was not trained to earn a living, and was ‘hurt but not angered by the fact that the father of the child is as free as a bird, while she is so tied that she barely manages to get to mass’. Journalist Ginnie Kineally suggested that

> In the final analysis, though, even a hundred helping agencies will not be enough so long as parents continue to throw out their pregnant daughters, so long as the men responsible for women’s pregnancies insist on abortion. But as long as people thoughtlessly make uncharitable and censorious remarks about unmarried mothers these parents and these boyfriends will continue to behave this way, out of fear of “what people will say”. So it could be said that

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175 Department of Health, FIN2/EST/0/543210.
a great many of us in Ireland are responsible, indirectly, for the evil of abortion. It’s not a pleasant thought.\textsuperscript{178}

12.123 In 1976 journalist Mary Kenny suggested that having a child outside marriage was the worst tragedy that could happen to an Irish family. She quoted a young single mother who claimed that “It’s not just your own life you’re supposed to have ruined…You’ve ruined your sisters’ marriage prospects and your brothers’ chance of promotion. Sometimes, young brothers can’t even be told, for fear of strong reactions. And by young brothers I mean lads of 25”. Kenny quoted from her interviews with Cherish clients: women who panicked and fled their home town, and often quit their job on discovering they were pregnant. ‘But the panic is for the old reason - fear of the family’s reaction, of society in small towns and also of forced adoption’.\textsuperscript{179}

The Catholic Church

12.124 By the mid-1970s growing numbers of single Irish women were travelling to England for abortion, and the proportion of extra-marital pregnancies ending in abortion was higher than in England. Over 80% of Irish women having abortions in England were single, whereas a majority of English-based women who had abortions were married. In 1981 the ratio of abortions to single births in Ireland was estimated at 70:100, prompting one sociologist to conclude that ‘for those unable or unwilling to assume the role of single parent, abortion is becoming the preferred solution’.\textsuperscript{180} Abortion had a major impact on Catholic church attitudes towards single mothers, though the change was not universal. Independently-minded priests such as Fergal O’Connor and James Good were among the most sympathetic. In 1973 James Good told a seminar on Christianity, held in a West Cork hotel, that he had worked with 1,000 unmarried mothers in the course of his work with adoption and ‘he doubted if they could produce one mortal sin between them all’.\textsuperscript{181} The publication of excerpts from Fr Good’s speech in a Sunday newspaper prompted a vehement letter from the secretary of the Catholic Priests Association who claimed that he was ‘leading the readers of your paper into error, if he thinks for a moment that they should accept his findings on sexual morality, and abandon the teaching of the Church that violations of the virtue of chastity can

\textsuperscript{179} Sunday Independent, 7 Nov. 1976.
\textsuperscript{180} Maire Ni Ghiolla Phadraig, ‘Social and cultural factors in family planning’ in Patrick Clancy (ed.), The Changing family (Dublin, 1984), p.79.
\textsuperscript{181} Sunday Independent, 8 April 1973.
be as serious as violation of the virtue of justice’. Much of this attack was directed at Fr Good’s criticism of papal teaching on contraception.\textsuperscript{182} The correspondence that followed this altercation showed that opinions were divided though a majority of letter writers were hostile. A Dublin woman asked ‘Why have I read so many indignant letters upbraiding Fr Good for declaring that he found no evil in the 1,000 unmarried mothers with whom he had come in contact? Surely, this is a matter for rejoicing, and reflects credit on Fr Good that he saw only the good in them’.\textsuperscript{183} A speech on medical ethics by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dermot Ryan, linked abortion, euthanasia and single mothers. He explained that the Catholic Hierarchy planned to establish a ‘lifeline’ to assist women contemplating abortion. People should not rush to attribute guilt and blame to single mothers; the male partner commonly remained hidden and was slow to assume responsibility for the pregnancy. Unmarried mothers should be treated with compassion, sympathetic understanding and practical assistance, but ‘people must not make the mistake of making compassion the criterion of a particularly tolerant minority’.\textsuperscript{184}

12.125 The primary purpose of CURA, which was launched in 1977, was to reduce the numbers of Irish women travelling to England for abortion. When Bishop Dermot O’Mahony sought financial support from the Department of Health, he mentioned that at a later stage CURA would probably give consideration to other problems - such as the status of ‘illegitimate’ children. The department noted that the only agencies consulted by the hierarchy before establishing CURA were the Catholic adoption agencies; furthermore CURA had no advisory committee. They expressed concern at being asked to provide funding (roughly three-quarters of total costs) for an organisation that was established without prior consultation, whose need was unproven, and might compete with existing organisations. CURA’s request for £17,000 in 1977-8 was substantially greater than the combined grants given to the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children, Cherish and Ally.\textsuperscript{185} The Minister of Health was also coming under pressure from Lifeline, a British anti-abortion organisation, to support their activities - but officials advised against doing this. Shortly after CURA was launched, the Bishop of Derry, Dr Edward Daly, suggested that Irish attitudes towards unmarried mothers were responsible for the many Irish women who sought abortions in

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Sunday Independent}, 15 April 1973.
\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Sunday Independent}, 13 May 1973.
\textsuperscript{185} Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482259
Britain. In 1978 Fr Colleran, formerly of the CPRSI, now a regional organiser for CURA, announced that CURA planned to provide hostels where mothers could stay with their babies when they left hospital. The Belmont Flatlets (see chapter 14) opened in 1980). CURA hoped to accommodate up to 70 women and children in the Dublin area; they also planned to establish day nurseries and a programme where families would provide child-care for an infant while the mother was at work. The Commission has not seen evidence that hostels or day nurseries were opened, other than the Belmont Flatlets. CURA would also, with the bishops’ permission, provide a guaranteed and free pregnancy testing service, with results within 24 hours. He reported that CURA had been contacted by up to 1,500 women in its first year; 10% of the women had been contemplating abortion; he claimed that only 20 women went ahead with an abortion.

An undated CURA handbook, which was probably printed in the early 1980s, listed their services as pregnancy testing; information and advice on social welfare entitlements; medical facilities; counselling; abortion; post-abortion counselling; pre-natal accommodation; foster care; adoption; help with keeping babies, including practical help around food, clothing, accommodation etc. The 1984 annual report noted that CURA had handled 7,353 telephone queries during that year. CURA referred pregnant women to Pelletstown and Dunboyne. By the 1980s fewer women were willing to go to mother and baby homes, so CURA organised family placements. Minutes of a meeting of the Connacht bishops in 1985 record that ‘most of those who come to CURA first will want adoption. As time goes on they will want to keep the baby’. They counselled against women ‘rushing into adoption’, because that decision ‘may contribute to a second pregnancy’. Some mothers wanted their daughter to have an abortion; ‘If the parents do not accept the child the girl should not keep the baby’. They noted that ‘Most of those who keep their baby end up in a mess. They experience great frustration in looking after the baby’. By the 1980s CURA had a team of volunteers and social workers who provided advice and supports to women who kept their babies. In Galway they organised a weekly tea morning for mothers and their children as a mutual support network. CURA also provided some short-term

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188 Dublin Diocesan Archives, Dermot O’Mahony papers
accommodation in flats and houses for single mothers and their child(ren), and they used their influence to secure local authority housing.\textsuperscript{189}

12.127 Fr Colleran claimed to have seen a change in attitudes towards unmarried mothers:

When I began 13 years ago, very few parents of the unmarried mother wanted to know. Now a large majority are prepared to help the pregnant daughter; most will take her child into the family and accept it as one of theirs. Often university graduates and the like who espouse strong liberal views turn out to be the most conservative. But overall the whole pattern, reflected in every class, is much more tolerant of the single mother.\textsuperscript{190}

12.128 Dr Cahal Daly, Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, criticised lingering stereotypes about the treatment of pregnant single women. ‘It is totally untrue that all pregnant girls are rejected by their home, blamed and scorned by caring institutions. But some still believe this. Then visiting social workers tell us that our services for unmarried mothers are better than almost anywhere - but they are not widely known’.\textsuperscript{191} Fr Michael Cleary and Bishop of Galway, Eamon Casey, both priests who frequently spoke in public about attitudes to unmarried mothers, were later identified as fathers of children born to single mothers. Michael Cleary pleaded for better financial support for single mothers and deserted wives.\textsuperscript{192} When Bishop Casey addressed the 1978 AGM of the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children he spoke about ‘The Society’s responsibility towards the unmarried parent and child’. He told the audience that ‘children born out of wedlock should be cherished more than ordinary children’; the ideal solution was to keep the child within the family setting. The government was opposed to abortion and it should reflect this opposition by supporting pro-life efforts. He saw no conflict between the work of the federation and CURA.\textsuperscript{193}

Family, friends and neighbours

12.129 The letters written to Cherish offer a sobering corrective to any belief that Irish attitudes towards unmarried motherhood had been transformed by the 1970s. A woman who kept her baby reported that she had lost ‘all my so-called friends’ as a consequence; she had also lost her self-confidence. In 1973 the mother of a
seven-year old son, who lived with her three brothers, possibly on a farm, wrote that if they discovered that she was again pregnant ‘they will probably put me out, I guess I would not blame them, once is bad enough’. She was ashamed to visit her doctor. One woman who had phoned Cherish from a provincial town apologised in a follow-up letter because she might ‘have sounded a bit “short” on the phone, but you understand I did not want to say too much as it is manned by locals at night in particular’. In 1974 many telephone exchanges in provincial Ireland were manual callers had to be connected by a telephonist who could listen to the call. A woman reported that around the time that she discovered she was pregnant, a young woman in the neighbourhood had a baby outside marriage ‘and my mother said to me “If anything ever happens to you, you can pack your things and go”, so she had decided not to tell her parents. A farmer’s daughter, who was living at home, concealing her pregnancy and milking a large herd of cows every day with her father, was scared of going to a maternity hospital, lest she meet a neighbour or a member of the nursing staff who knew her. She planned to place her baby in a foster home: ‘the main thing is that no one would know about it as it would kill both of them [parents] apart from that I could never face them again’. Another woman wanted to keep her pregnancy secret because she was afraid that the news might kill her parents as she had been identified as ‘the sensible one in the family’; she felt ‘angry, guilty, embarrassed, ashamed at present’. A woman who described herself as ‘the black sheep of the family’ felt ‘depressed and rejected by everyone’. She had contemplated suicide; planned to keep her baby but was afraid of being rejected by her friends. When one single mother contemplated getting a flat on her own (with her child) her mother said that ‘she would put a red light over the door’.

12.130 A long interview with Cherish workers and Cherish clients in 1976 highlighted the continuing, though declining pressure on mothers to have their child adopted. One mother thought that “The pressure is, I think, lessening a bit now, but it was almost irresistible when I had [her son] eight years ago...Not only my parents but all my contemporaries and all the institutions of Church and State seemed to be pushing for adoption”. If her baby had not been ill after he was born and had to stay in hospital for a year, he almost certainly would have been adopted. This article quoted Maura O’Dea of Cherish who suggested “some girls also want to keep their babies for the wrong reasons...An awful lot of young girls think of their babies as dolls to play with and don't realise the responsibility of a child”. The mother of a two-year old boy spoke of “the trauma of watching your parents age ten years when you tell them...You have to watch your friends doing their best to talk you
into giving up your child. They'll tell you, after all, they feel dragged down by what you're doing"…Sometimes, to be fair, the girls' own mothers do come around, in the end: sometimes it's in a compromising kind of way - they will, say come to Dublin to visit their daughter, but not encourage the girl to come back to her home town; or they will allow the girl a discreet visit, but ask her not to accompany them to the same Sunday Mass. Often the most unexpected parents turn out to be the most solid'.

12.131 One woman who wrote to Cherish in 1978 explained that her parents were very supportive but ‘at present I would prefer if at all possible I could leave [her home town]’. A 19-year-old from rural Ireland stated clearly ‘I want to get away as soon as possible, immediately. I don't want anyone to know'; she was unwilling to go to a mother and baby home, and wanted a family placement. Another described Killarney, her home town, as 'like a second Coronation Street' - presumably implying that gossip was rife. A woman reported that her mother told all the neighbours about her wonderful grandchild, adding 'They all think she's loopy for boasting about the baby instead of hiding her under the kitchen sink'. A mother who went home with her baby had a less happy experience, her parents gave her money to 'leave the country, as they are badly affected by the talk and do not want me around'. A single mother, whose parents were minding her daughter when she went to work, commented that

I think that the worst part of it all for my mother was facing the neighbours. That's when I felt really bad about it. She would go out to the shops or something and come back white and quiet because of something someone had said - or what hadn't been said more often, because the usual reaction was 'Oh I see' and then a long silence.

12.132 A woman living in provincial Ireland, whose daughter planned to keep her child sought advice as to what she should do: ‘you can imagine what this place is like…everyone knows everybody’s business and most of them are not very charitable in cases like this’. This woman had offered to keep the baby while her daughter arranged a job, but that’s when the trouble started. Some of my family and my best friend and my parish priest (who has been most helpful) have advised me that that would be the wrong decision. They say the child would have a bad time when she

starts school - that everyone would know she was illegitimate and would be nasty to her. I was full bent on keeping the little girl as I could not care less about what neighbours or anyone else says but now I am wondering.

12.133 A woman who was pregnant with her second child wrote that ‘the prying and malicious gossip of neighbours is causing me a lot of stress’; she wanted to move to a place where she was ‘less known’ but believed that this would be difficult, as she had been allocated local authority housing. A single mother living with her child in rural Ireland wanted to move to Dublin as she felt that she was ‘stigmatised in the community’. One woman, whose mother had offered to care for her child ‘probably impulsively’, became concerned about the neighbour’s attitudes. The school teacher mother of another woman was insistent that her grandchild should be ‘hidden quite a lot’ because she was ‘aware of what the nuns think…And very aware of her position in the community’.

12.134 One set of parents planned to move house because of their daughter’s pregnancy. A Cork woman who had decided to keep her baby reported that her parents were opposed to her decision and would not permit her to visit with her child, but the Capuchin Friars had assisted her in finding somewhere to live, and her boss and his wife brought her and baby to visit her parents; they relented and wanted mother and baby to come home for summer holidays. A second-time single mother, who had kept her first child, born when she was eighteen years of age, reported that her mother ‘stood by me on both occasions’. Recalling the infancy of her first child in the late 1960s, she recalled that ‘The first three months were hard especially in a small town…with everyone talking and nudging when I went shopping but then I just got to the stage when I ignored them, and pretended I did not care about them’.

12.135 The mother of a five year old girl told Woman’s Way that ‘The children come, [to their home] but their mothers keep their distance.’ In 1993 the Sunday Independent quoted a woman whose daughter became pregnant: ‘How would I tell my mother, my friends, my colleagues at work? How would I face anybody? I could not face anybody. I told nobody. We sold our house and moved to a rented house in a new area. I left behind all my very good friends and neighbours.”

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196 Sunday Independent, 1 Aug. 1993.
Social censure might even extend to a woman who married when pregnant. A letter writer to Woman’s Way described how

The street I live in is full of gossips and when I had to get married last year they’ve never let me forget it. When I take the pram to the shops I hear remarks and one woman has reduced me to tears with the wicked things she says. I love my little boy and I love my husband too. I want to be a good wife and mother, but they make me feel dirty and shameful. Even my mother says she’ll never be able to hold her head up again. Some days I can’t face going out and meeting anyone, so I shop very early or nearly at closing time to avoid people. My husband says I shouldn’t do this, but he doesn’t have to put up with it.\(^\text{197}\)

12.136 In 1980 Woman’s Way noted that 50% of single mothers were keeping their babies. They asked

Does the decrease in babies being offered for adoption coincide with an increase in public understanding? Unfortunately it doesn’t appear so. As one social worker put it, the only reason more girls are having the guts and determination to keep their babies is because there is now excellent support available from various concerned organisations. Thanks to pressure from these groups, unmarried mothers can now get State allowance, tax relief and so on, along with practical help and advice to deal with all the nitty gritty problems that come their way. Public opinion towards the unmarried mother is more tolerant in our larger cities, although far from disappeared, but in many rural areas local censure is still as strongly prejudicial against the single mother as it ever was.\(^\text{198}\)

12.137 Cherish reported increasing involvement by the wider family in the lives of single mothers and their children; 46% of parents who were aware of the pregnancy/child were supportive and helpful, 15% were not; 33% did not know the situation, in 6% of cases the main support came from siblings.\(^\text{199}\) However a study carried out by Ally of 459 women who contacted them in 1979 concluded that ‘The message that comes over loud and clear is that many of the girls who come to us don’t feel that their relationship with their parents is strong enough even to cope with an extreme problem for their daughter, and it is also apparent that many parents were simply

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\(^\text{198}\) Woman’s Way, 2 April 1980.
\(^\text{199}\) Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/489154.
not interested enough to know of their children’s need for help'; 46% of parents didn’t know about their daughter’s pregnancy. Whether to tell parents or not remained a regular topic for debate even in the late 1970s.

12.138 In 1981 a 20-year old women who was living in a flat in Dublin with her baby and the father of her child contacted Cherish. Her parents had refused to give her a letter permitting them to marry during her pregnancy, and she hadn’t seen them for several months until they called to her flat, saying that the baby’s father had ‘no legal hold on the baby'; they wanted to place her child with adoptive parents who were known to them. They would come to collect the baby on a specific date. She asked whether they had the power to do so. The case notes on one client, whose religion was recorded as Protestant, stated that ‘her relationship with parents deteriorated, they pressured her to place the baby for adoption. They disapprove of the PF, who is not Protestant and because there is a history of alcoholism in his family’. The parents of a single mother who was a Methodist had ‘very definite views'; they were described as ‘very religious’. The woman’s partner and father of her child was a Catholic, and he wanted the baby to be baptised as a Catholic. Another woman had a row and left the family home because the father of her child was Protestant, and she was Catholic; this couple separated.

12.139 Some mothers came under pressure to marry the father of their child, even though both were teenagers. A social worker with Ally commented that

The immediate thing resorted to is the decency of marriage. This can be totally traumatic. Furthermore, in an Ireland of the 1980s it is horrendous to think of the terrible silence and suffering the girl is being put through because of the social pressures. It is hardly surprising that many girls resort to the abortion trail.

12.140 Peter Prendergast general secretary of Fine Gael and an Ally spokesman commented that

The picture presented in the [Ally] report is but a part of a complex scene which ranges from hastily arranged marriages with little hope of a future stability and happiness to a sordid abortion trail. Unless we face up to these

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201 At the time, parental consent was required for a person under age 21 to marry.
problems with realism and genuine concern we are storing up massive difficulties which will be much harder to relieve later on.\textsuperscript{203}

12.141 Women continued to face pressures to place their child for adoption. A priest told one Cherish client that ‘she would be selfish to keep the baby’; another woman was considering placing her child for adoption, though she believed that this was the selfish option. One woman explained: ‘I cannot keep the child and do not wish to. I would like to give it up for adoption where someone could give it a good home and love…this situation is pushing me to the edge, if I do not get the child adopted I think I will kill myself. I do not want this child. I am too young, (eighteen), and I do not even like children’. A woman who had contacted CURA claimed that ‘they only talked about adoption’.

12.142 Some mothers changed their minds and reclaimed children from adoptive parents before the final adoption order was signed. One woman reported that her family had rejected her because she had decided to keep the child. The putative father wanted the baby to be adopted and had abandoned her. A later note on this woman’s case file stated that she was ‘talked into’ placing her baby for adoption by her parents; she felt ‘very pressurised into signing the final papers’. A woman who was brought up in care felt that she ‘owes it to the baby to keep him’. But a woman who planned to keep her baby ‘to add meaning to her life’; was contemplating abortion a month later. Cherish social workers reported that some clients were totally unrealistic about the restrictions on their lives if they kept their baby - one young mother asked where was the local dance hall.

The loneliness of the single mother

12.143 One theme found in many letters is the loneliness and isolation of single mothers - hence the importance of Cherish. A twenty-nine year old woman explained that she had cut herself off all her friends, and moved into a bedsit, in case they would discover that she was pregnant. This sense of isolation was most pronounced among mothers who were raising their children outside Dublin. One woman asked where was ‘the hang out for the single parent’ in Cork? A sadder letter came from a mother who was living with her parents ‘and I may add with our neighbours’. There were many tensions and friction within the family; ‘personally I have no real friends’. A single mother in Donegal felt ‘isolated’; she went to work, but was too

exhausted to organise a social life. She wanted to meet other single mothers. ‘I know of no one in my county who is a single parent. Here the child of an unmarried mother is either adopted (the girl often has absolutely no other choice), or else brought up by the girl’s parents’. One young woman ‘would love to be able to mix with people in the same predicament as myself, as I get depressed looking around at and also hanging around with all my friends’, who were presumably not single mothers. In 1980 a woman who was five months’ pregnant, unemployed and living in a large provincial town, stayed in the house all the time ‘as the stigma of the unmarried mother is terrible around here’. She felt ‘very lonely and alone’.

Maura O’Dea told an officer of the Limerick Social Service Council that Cherish ran fortnightly group meetings, where mothers discussed their problems and learned from each other’s experience. AMIE, an organisation to assist single mothers in Mayo was started in the late, 1970s; over the first four years 200 women contacted them seeking advice and assistance. They employed a full-time social worker, funded by the Western Health Board and AMIE was supported by volunteers and local branches of Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce. In 1978 they were planning to purchase a house in Castlebar to provide a home for four mothers and their children. In 1981 a 19-year old single mother was planning to establish a single mothers group in Finglas. By 1978 there was a single parents group in Ballymun; they set up their own day nursery in 1982; it took them two years to secure premises. A Ballymun single mother of two children commented that “There’s great opposition from the clergy and everyone else to girls having abortions. But the facilities for single mothers who keep their babies is [sic] non-existent. We felt that a nursery where kids would get their meals and be well looked after should be provided. We knew we would be waiting forever for the State to do it, so we did it ourselves”. The Department of Social Welfare gave a grant towards the cost of setting up the nursery, and it was hoped that the Eastern Health Board would provide substantial funding towards running costs. Single mother groups were also established in Waterford, Galway, Letterkenny and Cork in the mid-1990s.

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205 *Sunday Independent*, 17 May 1981.
Discrimination and Prejudice

12.145 In 1983 a social worker, who had counselled many Irish women who decided to have an abortion in England commented ‘Abortion is never the easy way out…Most women we see are too anxious and distressed, fearful most of all of being found out by their families, friends or boyfriends’. This article in the *Sunday Independent* noted that most Irish women having abortions were single ‘and they usually reach the agonised decision not because of medical or financial reasons, but because the social stigma against unmarried mothers is still so strong in Ireland today. Teachers in religious orders schools, student nurses, ban gardaí and women who work in small firms feel they stand to lose their jobs as well as the respect of their family and friends’. Many women ‘fear their boyfriends would stop seeing them if they found out…Others are afraid wedding plans would be dropped and others still are persuaded by their boyfriends to have the abortion, even though they themselves may want the baby. For single women in their thirties, the decision is hardest of all, as they feel this is their last chance to have a baby’.

12.146 Ally’s annual report in August 1984 was headed ‘Unwed mums: Stigma not gone’. In 1979 Nuala Fennell, politician and journalist related the story of a woman, who was within three months of completing her nursing training, when she became pregnant. The matron ‘told her to pack her case and go home to the country saying that she would telephone her mother’. In 1982 Eileen Flynn, a teacher in a convent secondary school, was dismissed when she became pregnant; she was cohabiting with a married man. In 1984 the Employment Appeals Tribunal upheld the right of the religious order, who ran the school, to dismiss her, because her lifestyle was repugnant to their values. When she appealed this judgment to the High Court, it was upheld. Flynn was the most high-profile of these cases. However Ireland was not quite as exceptional in this respect, as is sometimes thought. In 1974 unmarried teachers who became pregnant were dismissed in Britain; it is unclear when that practice ended. In 1985 Majella Moynihan, a Garda, faced a disciplinary hearing because she had given birth to a baby and was not married, which was contrary to the *Garda Síochána (Discipline) Regulations 1971*: ‘conduct prejudicial to discipline or likely

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207 This was the term then used to describe female members of An Garda Síochána.
210 Woman’s Way, 6 April 1979
211 Tom Inglis, *Truth, power and lies. Irish society and the case of the Kerry Babies* (Dublin, 2003), p. 126.
212 Thane & Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?* p. 137. The fact that teachers were employed by local authorities probably meant that the practice varied by area.
to bring discredit on the Force’. The father of her child was a colleague. It appears that she was only spared dismissal from the force because of the intervention of the archbishop of Dublin. This case only became known to the public in 2019. Some conservative politicians alleged that women deliberately became pregnant to secure a house. In 1989 a number of callers to the Gay Byrne Radio Show painted exaggerated pictures of unmarried mothers living off the state, but the majority tended towards the view ‘that to be an unmarried mother on Social Welfare is one of the roughest and thankless gigs going, and that anyone who suggests otherwise is either pig-ignorant or just simply bloody-minded’.

12.147 Rape only began to feature in public discourse in the 1980s; the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre was founded in 1979. In 1985 the Sunday Press told the story of the mother of a five-month old baby, who became pregnant as a result of rape. When she tried to tell her mother about the rape and pregnancy she received ‘no sympathy, no understanding’. Her mother’s attitude was ‘She asked for it’. This woman was assisted by the Wellwoman Clinic; they referred her to the Rape Crisis Centre for counselling and to a sympathetic gynaecologist in Holles Street. Following the birth of the baby, her brother urged her to place him for adoption.

12.148 Teenage pregnancies attracted attention, though the trends are complex and much of the media coverage exaggerated the incidence. In 1970 a total of 1,709 ‘illegitimate’ births were registered; 30% were born to mothers under the age of 20. By 1980, when the number of births had more than doubled to 3,723 the proportion of teenage mothers had risen to 38%. In 1990 however 29.25% of the 7,767 births were to teenage mothers, which was fractionally lower than the percentage in 1970. Sunday newspapers occasionally featured scare stories on this topic. ‘Scandal of 13 Year old Mothers’ by Mairtin MacCormaic; ‘Schoolgirls Unmarried Mothers’ by John Feeney; ‘Maths, Macbeth and Bringing up Baby’, Mary Kavanagh. Journalist Frances O’ Rourke commented that one theme was ‘how much help is available to single mothers’, yet many pregnant women were still ‘paralysed by fear from looking for that help’. Despite changing attitudes...
unmarried pregnant women continued to be judged harshly. She claimed that there were many schools, ‘perhaps the majority, who won’t let pregnant schoolgirls continue with their classes’. In an article titled ‘Sex and Schoolgirls’ Helen Shaw noted that although many schools had to confront the issue of pregnant students neither the Department of Education nor the schools had formulated a policy or even discussed the matter. As the schools were not owned or run by the Department of Education, the department had no power to prevent school managers from expelling pregnant pupils, but ‘neither have they advised the schools against such extreme action or to direct the schools to protect the child’s right to education’. Nuala Fennell, Minister of State for Women’s Affairs, called for maternity protection legislation (legislation preventing pregnant women from being dismissed at work) to be extended to school pupils - but given that Eileen Flynn, a teacher was not protected by that legislation, and neither was Majella Moynihan, the reform needed to extend more widely.

12.149 Most pregnant students had to leave school, which meant that they had to leave home if they wished to continue their education. Many went to Dunboyne. Shaw determined that most convent schools would not welcome the return of a young mother who had decided to keep her baby, and ‘Even the VECs are not prepared to guarantee the child’s right to education without plenty of conditions added’. The principal of a large Dublin VEC indicated that the key issue was the hostility of parents to the presence of a single mother among the pupils.

12.150 The death in 1984 of the 15-year old school girl Anne Lovett, who gave birth to a stillborn baby beside a grotto in Granard prompted widespread emotion, and much commentary. It resulted in a huge number of letters to the Gay Byrne programme - a morning show on RTÉ radio 1 that attracted a large audience. These letters provide evidence about attitudes to unmarried motherhood, and more specifically to teenage pregnancy in the mid-1980s. Some were written by conservative listeners, who used this tragedy to endorse past customs and practice. One anonymous correspondent claimed that such a tragedy would not have happened forty years ago because people would have noticed the pregnancy and spoken to her parents; ‘would it not be better to be a busybody and save a life

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221 Inglis, *Truth power and lies*, pp 124-5.
than to be blind to the needs of others. It could have saved this poor girl and her baby. Another writer complained about ‘church-bashing: the sooner we are back to Christian values and moral teaching the better’; another hoped that the tragedy would ‘scare(s) young people not to be having sex when they’re children’. A Tralee writer blamed the rising rate of illegitimacy on the fact that priests were not preaching ‘as forcefully as previously’; he claimed that such a tragedy would not have happened in the past. Another lamented that those covering the ‘whole tragic affair did not raise the subject of “good old-fashioned morals”’. One correspondent ‘thank[ed] God for the courageous mothers who have the strength to have their children adopted’. Another conservatively-minded writer rejected the criticism of past attitudes towards illegitimacy, arguing that ‘They had a good reason to act the way they did. No contraception to prevent pregnancy or VD. Sexual freedom was out of the question and frowned upon. The millions of children that would inevitably come on stream from this practice would never have a chance of survival’.

12.151 Some writers reflected on their own experiences; their ignorance about sex when they were teenagers. A woman who became pregnant in her early twenties and then married the father of her child, ‘wish[ed] like little Ann Lovett that I was taken to heaven. I have lived in hell since’. A woman who spent five months in a mother and baby home complained that nobody had tried to understand her underlying problems. A single mother, pregnant for the second time, queried the widespread comments that Anne Lovett would have received every assistance if she had asked: ‘no one comes to help, or offered any help’. This woman had lived in her home town since her first child was born but had never been visited by a social worker or the St Vincent de Paul Society: ‘I feel people don’t want to be troubled with the problems of a single mother’.

12.152 Anne Lovett’s death prompted criticism of the Catholic church and its attitudes towards pregnancy outside marriage. Such explicit criticism would appear to have been a relatively new development. A correspondent claimed that those who believed that this tragedy would change attitudes, ‘are only deluding themselves…basic attitudes towards unmarried mothers will remain unchanged. Some people’s attitude will as always be influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church that getting pregnant outside marriage is still a grave sin, and knowing this, the young people will think twice before asking for help’. A Kilkenny writer described Ann Lovett as ‘a victim of our society and stupid laws. A society
that made her so afraid to ask for help that the only one she felt she could turn to was Our Lady… the doctors and everybody in our so-called Christian society. I believe what happened is a reflection on us all’. Another suggested that ‘the heart of the issue…is the warped primeval teachings of the Catholic church…our attitudes are a reflection of the teachings of the Irish church. They in no small measure must accept the death of this terrified girl and her suffered child - now in some limbo - as another bead of sorrow in that rosary of shame hanging from our country’s lump of ignorance’.

12.153 The tragic death of Ann Lovett and her child, and the story of Joanne Hayes, a single mother from Kerry, which was and is widely referred to as ‘the Kerry babies’, meant that the mid-1980s was a time of unprecedented commentary about unmarried mothers. However it is unclear whether these events brought about a marked change in attitudes. A survey of women aged between 16 and 45, carried out in 1987 indicated that almost 60% believed that it was morally wrong for a woman to have a child outside marriage, however they did not agree with the suggestion that payments to single mothers should be reduced, indeed a majority recommended that they should be increased. In 1992, ten years after the Anne Lovett tragedy, one journalist commented that ‘Her death shocked the nation and prompted us to look at our attitudes and facilities - or lack of them - for women with traumatic pregnancies. As a result of such national heart-searching, some new services were put in place. Everyone hoped that such a tragedy would never happen again’. However in the previous six months the bodies of three new-born babies were found abandoned; one of the mothers was a teenager.

12.154 The 1990s saw a series of high-profile stories about unmarried mothers and children. In 1993 the story of Annie Murphy, a young American woman whose child was fathered by Bishop Eamon Casey became known, resulting in the bishop’s resignation. In 1995 Phyllis Hamilton went public about her relationship with Fr Michael Cleary, and their two children; the first child was placed for adoption, she raised her son Ross while living with Fr Cleary ostensibly as his housekeeper. In 1996 RTÉ broadcast a documentary, *Dear Daughter*, the story of Christine Buckley, who was the daughter of a Nigerian medical student and a married Irish mother, and her life in Goldenbridge industrial school. Mary Raftery’s

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222 RTÉ archives, letters to the Gay Byrne Programme.
223 This story is examined in detail in Inglis, *Truth power and lies*.
documentary *States of Fear* that aired in 1999 drew attention to the many children who were placed in industrial schools and the reasons for their institutional upbringing. In the same year the government established a Commission to inquire into child abuse in institutions. Not all the children in these institutions were 'illegitimate', but many were.

12.155 Another development that focussed attention on unmarried mothers and their children was the growing number of adopted children who were attempting to find their birth mothers; a voluntary contact register was established in 1990. In 1988 St Anne’s Adoption Society reported that a substantial part of their work was ‘not reflected in the word adoption’. The number of adoptions had fallen substantially, but there was a growing number of inquiries from adoptees tracing their parent(s) - 59 in the year 1987-88 compared with 16 the previous year. St Anne’s reported that social workers were increasingly working with families, not simply with the single mother; there was a demand for family therapy, and counselling, including counselling for grandparents ‘especially if the girl’s wishes differ from the child’s grandparents’.

**Extra-marital births**

12.156 One group that are often forgotten in the story of unmarried mothers are the women, married, and perhaps separated or deserted, who gave birth to children that were not their husbands. During the last two years of World War II, one-third of 'illegitimate' children born in Birmingham and up to 50% in other areas were extra-marital children of married women. This proved a particularly difficult issue in Ireland. These women were not generally admitted to mother and baby homes. The absence of divorce until the late 1990s prevented couples in stable relationships, where one or both parties had previously married and separated, from marrying. Article 41 of the Irish Constitution pledged ‘to protect the institution of Marriage on which the Family is founded’, and, reflecting this article, the Adoption Act, (1952) did not permit the adoption of ‘legitimate’ children. All children born to married women were deemed to be the child of the woman’s husband and therefore 'legitimate' unless the couple went to court to refute this. As the infant was ‘legitimate’, she/he could not be placed for adoption, yet many husbands were unwilling to accept an extra-marital child. In 1978 Fr John O’Mahony, director of St Anne’s Adoption Society wrote a memorandum on the

226 Cork Diocesan Archives, St Anne’s Adoption Society, Box 4, annual report 1988 and report 12/11/1987.

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registration difficulties of children who were born extra-marily. He indicated that this was ‘a growing problem’; he estimated that at least 10 per cent of St Anne’s case load related to extra-marital births and the number was rising; he expressed the opinion there were 200-300 extra-marital births every year. He suggested that some women were presenting themselves in a maternity hospital as single and registering the child as the child of a single mother. He believed that there was a real risk that some of these births would not be registered, and no adoption society could accept false registration documents. He recommended that as an alternative to court proceedings, an affidavit from the mother and two independent witnesses, giving the name of the child’s father, should be accepted, permitting the child to be regarded as ‘illegitimate’ and therefore eligible for adoption. Adoption in Northern Ireland or Britain was not restricted to ‘illegitimate’ children, and there is evidence that extra-marital children were moved to Northern Ireland for adoption, and this practice was known to the authorities. In 1986 a Department of Health memorandum, relating to the proposed closing of Bessborough and Stamullen, recommended that no action should be taken in relation to the infant nursing home at Fahan, in Donegal: ‘It provides a facility which spares our national blushes in the area of the adoption of legitimate but unwanted children’. The Fathers

12.157 The only public references to unmarried fathers before the late 1960s are in relation to affiliation orders. The Kilkenny conference used the wording ‘unmarried parent’, rather than ‘unmarried mother’ - a terminology that reflected changing approaches towards single-parent families internationally around this time and a session at this conference was titled ‘The role of the unmarried father’. At the conference Fr Colleran, of the CPRSI, spoke of the advantages of involving unmarried fathers from an early stage, both in relation to the pregnancy and the future of the child. He claimed that an increasing number of fathers were ‘coming forward’. The consensus of the conference session was that ‘the State should insist on the father fulfilling his material obligations towards the mother and his child’; however it was agreed that ‘the attitudes of the law towards unmarried fathers should not be actively negative’. He had a right to know about the pregnancy, and a right to maintain contact with his child ‘unless it can be shown that such contact is detrimental to the child’. This interest in fathers proved

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228 Cork Diocesan Archives, St Anne’s Adoption Society, Box 29
229 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/489126.
230 The unmarried mother in the Irish community, pp 22-5.
short-lived. While the conference used the term ‘single parent’ the publication of the proceedings used the title ‘mother’.

12.158 Putative fathers feature in the earlier chapter that profiles unmarried mothers - but most are anonymous, they commonly disappeared when the woman announced that she was pregnant; sometimes they accompanied her to England having promised marriage and then vanished; others denied paternity, many emigrated. The portrayal in the Cherish records, which mainly comes from the mothers, is generally negative. One woman claimed that the father of her child treated her ‘like she had leprosy’. There are numerous complaints about men evading financial responsibility for their child, enjoying a comfortable life while mother and child lived in poverty. In 1971 a single mother with a six-year old daughter sought advice from a newspaper columnist about what to tell her daughter about her father. She described him as ‘a callous and irresponsible man’ who left her when she became pregnant; other women only discovered that the father of their child was married when they informed him of their pregnancy.

In 1974 June Levine claimed that a group of unmarried mothers was setting up a register of single fathers, which would remain confidential; the mothers planned to send newsletters to the men ‘in the hope that some will see the reality of their relationships and agree to take an interest in the well-being of their children’. Cherish advised mothers about a father’s rights with respect to his child, and they supplied guidance on how women should address their child’s queries about their fathers.

12.159 It is important not to exaggerate the number of fathers who wished to be involved with their child. In 1976 a Cherish officer told Mary Kennedy that ‘75% of them [the fathers] are still running’. Some were married - divorce was not available in Ireland until the late 1990s. Many fathers ‘don’t want to know, others aren’t even told’. In 1980 a social worker with Ally claimed that only 47% of single fathers - presumably these statistics related to women who had contacted Ally - were involved in any way in assisting their girlfriends through their pregnancy. Some 53% were not in any way helpful; 23% just didn’t want to know. 30% were not consulted by their girlfriends as they felt it was not worth their while. In most of the

234 Department of Health, 485291 asked Claire
235 Sunday Independent, 8 Nov. 1976; Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482259.
latter cases the relationship was casual and was not sufficiently stable to sustain such pressures.236

12.160 In 1978 the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children noted that they had received queries from a number of fathers who wished to be recorded on the birth certificate of their child and the Federation's quarterly bulletin set out how this could be done. By the 1980s an increasing number of men were accompanying their partner to the Cherish office, and reports suggest that some were supportive. One file relates to a man who asks how he could be more supportive to his pregnant girlfriend. He was concerned because she kept changing her mind, and her attitude towards him. His parents had told him that he was foolish to have acknowledged paternity, which prompted him to move out of home. Some men tried to encourage the mother to place the baby for adoption, one woman reported that the father would ‘support her if she opts for termination’, but would not be involved if she kept the baby, ‘because he will not allow this to interfere with his life’. By the 1980s Cherish was receiving more queries from men. One father acknowledged that when his son was born he felt unable to raise the child with his girl-friend; she was unwilling to raise their child as a single parent, so he was reconsidering his position, and came to Cherish to inquire about accommodation. He did not wish his son to be adopted. Another male client wished to discuss the social and legal implications of co-parenting where a couple was not married. Cherish told one mother, in response to a query, that the father of her child had a right to apply to the courts for access or custody, but there had been few such cases and the social worker didn’t believe that any had been successful.

12.161 That changed with the enactment of the Status of Children Act 1987 which abolished the status of ‘illegitimacy’. A press release by the Diocese of Cork and Ross Family Centre in 1989 noted that an increasing number of fathers were aware of the birth of their child and over 50% were supportive of the mother. A growing number of fathers were applying for guardianship and either custody or access to their child. If the father was granted guardianship a mother could not place the child for adoption without his consent.237 In 1990, the Lone Parent’s Allowance replaced the unmarried mother’s allowance (and other means tested payments to lone parents) and became available to male lone parents on the same

237 Cork Diocesan Archives, St Anne’s Adoption Society, Box 4.
basis as female lone parents. In 1996 this became the one-parent family payment; 59,000 women and men, who were parents of 95,000 children received this benefit the following year; only a small minority of recipients were men.\textsuperscript{238}

**From Unmarried Mother to Single Parent: the Changing Irish Family 1970s–2000**

12.162 In 1982 Joe Robins, Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health gave the keynote address at the annual general meeting of the Federation of Services for the Unmarried Parent and their Children. He reflected on the major changes that had taken place over the past decade in relation to single mothers and their children. The number of 'illegitimate' births doubled between 1971 and 1980; the number of children legitimated by subsequent marriage rose from 172 to 623 (children whose parents married after their birth). In 1971 adoption orders amounted to 71\% of 'illegitimate' births; by 1980 they had fallen to 37\% of 'illegitimate' births. Robins estimated that in 1970, approximately one unmarried mother in five were keeping their babies; by 1980 a majority were opting to raise their child. Unmarried mothers were living in 'a less hostile society'; attitudes were changing, reflecting the 'changing values of the modern world'. He highlighted some concerns: the number of mothers who having determined to raise their child, realised after perhaps two years that they were unable to do so; the need for mature social workers to advise single mothers. He described the 6,000 women who were receiving unmarried mothers’ allowance as 'a large dependent group within our population'.\textsuperscript{239} The annual report of the Rotunda Hospital for 1981 recorded that 505 of the 608 ‘illegitimate’ babies born that year were being kept by their mothers; 20 mothers were undecided, and there were 12 neo-natal deaths. The parents of 14\% of these infants were cohabiting - some because one or both were unable to secure a divorce.

12.163 The trends that Robins identified accelerated in the following decade. The 1980s were marked by a sharp fall in fertility rates and a significant increase in the number of births to single mothers. Professor Pat Clancy wrote about ‘the emergence of a rapidly increasing number of “voluntary” one parent families, [which] forces us to re-examine, not just the welfare issues involved, but also the very concept of the family’.\textsuperscript{240} Between 1982 and 1992, the number of single


\textsuperscript{239} Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/481800.

\textsuperscript{240} 'Demographic change and the Irish family' in *The Changing Family* (Dublin, 1984), p. 29.
mothers more than doubled.241 By 1993 one family in ten was a single-parent family; 18% of births were extra-marital and 40% of first births were born to single mothers. Teenage mothers, who were keeping their children were increasingly welcomed and supported by their parents; but Cherish suggested that only 12% remained long-term single mothers.242 Changes in adoptions reflected changing families. The number of adoptions fell sharply and, in 1986, 28% of adoption orders involved adoption by relatives/family.243 Most of these involved a child being adopted by his/her mother and the woman’s husband - sometimes he was the child’s father, sometimes not. By 1995 over two-thirds of adoption orders were family adoptions; 90% involved the mother of the child and her husband.244 Most of the remainder involved the adoption of children born outside Ireland.

12.164 In 1978 a survey by the Department of Health of children coming into care, showed that the largest category - 33% were the children of single mothers who were ‘unable to cope’; 40% of these mothers were not in regular contact with a social worker. A follow-up study published in 1981 of 40 children of unmarried mothers who were taken into care revealed that one-third went into care because their mother was ill; 21% because she was unable to cope with the responsibility of single parenthood; 11% because of a lack of emotional response to her child. The remainder gave diverse reasons: unsuitable housing, squatting, rejection by grandparents; secondary causes included homelessness, lack of family support, inability to cope. This study revealed a high recurrence of children going into care which was interpreted as ‘indicating a continuing problem with coping with the child’. A substantial number of the mothers had been living with the father of their child before the birth, but the number fell following the birth. Cohabitation was a bar to getting the unmarried mothers’ allowance. Most of the mothers were in contact with their families, but they received little support from them. The study concluded that ‘the majority of mothers were emotionally and materially isolated in terms of contacts and tangible and useful supportive relationships either from their own families or from the child’s father’. The authors suggested that ‘the study indicates a lack of national or local policy in relation to the place of unmarried mothers and their children in our society’.245

243 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/489154.
244 Finola Kennedy, Cottage to crèche. Family change in Ireland (Dublin, 2001), p. 44.
245 Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/481800.
A more extensive study of 3,724 children taken into care in 1981 revealed that 36% were admitted because their unmarried mother could not cope. Finola Kennedy suggested that this implied that unmarried mothers were not getting sufficient support from the state or the community. The 1980s was a tough decade in Ireland, with a high rate of unemployment and pressure on public services. In 1987 the Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children noted that over the past year unmarried mothers had increasingly become ‘the victims of the begrudging attitude’; however in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s the attitude had an economic rather than a moral base, they suggested that it was a reflection of the fact that there was less money ‘to go around’ because of the recession.

By the 1980s unmarried mothers formed one component in the growing number of one-parent families, which also included a large number of separated or divorced wives. Lone parents were at greater risk of poverty and were more reliant on social welfare than two-parent households; unmarried mothers were the cohort of lone parents that were at greatest risk of poverty. In 1983 Cherish published Singled Out in response to requests for information about the status and entitlements of single parents and their children. The foreword noted that the booklet raised questions about rights to housing, welfare and equality before the law, which were ‘often perceived as privileges rather than entitlements’. It noted that Article 41 of the Irish Constitution pledged ‘to protect the institution of Marriage on which the Family is founded’, ‘Because of the exclusive nature of marriage other family lifestyles are noticeable and appear threatening to the existing system’. The pamphlet suggested that this did not reflect the reality of contemporary Ireland.

In 1993 the Second Commission on the Status of Women highlighted the tenfold rise in births outside marriage and the long-term consequences of younger women having children as single mothers. Their report contains a series of recommendations about education, training and removing barriers that discouraged lone mothers from participating in the labour market. The fact that

247 Irish Times, 23 May 1987, in Department of Health, CCP/INA/0/482721.
249 Cherish, Singled Out.
lone mothers were discussed in a chapter headed ‘Women in situations of disadvantage’ indicated that while social attitudes and state supports had changed dramatically over the past forty years, single mothers continued to face many difficulties. Lone mothers now included a substantial number of women who had been married and were now separated. Despite access to state benefits and changes in social attitudes lone mothers who wished to raise their child(ren) remained at high risk of poverty, as they were in the early and mid-twentieth century. In 1995 the government established a Commission on the Family to examine the needs and priorities of families in a rapidly changing social and economic environment. The decision to establish this commission reflected the changes in Irish families; the rise in the number of lone parent families, non-marital births and marital breakdown. The removal of the constitutional ban on divorce in 1995 paved the way for the legalisation of divorce the following year. The final report of the commission, with the title ‘Strengthening Families for Life’ was published in 1998, setting out a range of measures that were designed to support the increasingly diverse families found in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century. The 2002 Census of Population reflected this diversity. Volume 3 Household Composition and Family Units gives 17 different types of household, including ‘lone mother with children (of any age)’, and ‘lone mother with children (of any age) and other persons’. Unmarried mothers were no longer being singled out; they formed part of a growing community of diverse households, though many one-time unmarried mothers and their child(ren) were now counted among the two-parent households (married or cohabiting) with children.