

Report whitewashes Ireland's unmarried mother and baby homes scandal: 9,000 dead babies, mass graves, illegal medical experiments, trafficking

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In 2015, the Irish government established the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, after sinister revelations regarding the criminal treatment of young unmarried girls and women who became pregnant and were forced into institutions.

The five-year investigation revealed the deaths of 9,000 babies between 1922 and 1998, some buried in mass, unmarked graves. Of the 57,000 babies born in the homes investigated, 15 percent died before their lives had hardly begun.

Announcing the investigation in 2014, then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny declared children born to unmarried parents were treated as "an inferior sub-species". He admitted the Dail (parliament) had records reaching back to the 1930s, and that the situation was known as far back as 1972.

Kenny proposed only to probe aspects of the shameful past and avoid apportioning blame. Only 14 mother and baby institutions, which housed 56,000 mothers, run mainly by Catholic nuns, and four state run county Homes, which housed 25,000 mothers, were investigated. Groups campaigning on behalf of the women and children opposed the narrow remit, complaining that a further 182 institutions, state agencies and individuals should be investigated and calling for public hearings.

From the first, the Commission intended to cover over more than it revealed, fearing further catastrophic erosion of what is left of the authority, and financial interests, of the Catholic Church.

The Irish state that emerged from Ireland's brutal partition by Britain in 1921 increasingly relied on the Catholic church to systematically terrorise the entire working population on behalf of the Irish bourgeoisie. This role was recognised and sanctioned by the Irish constitution drafted under President Éamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil in 1937, which overturned the previous secular approach and, while retreating from making Catholicism a state religion, assigned it an undefined "special position" alongside other religions.

Catholic view of the sanctity of marriage and the family were enforced. Sexual relations outside marriage were abhorred. Contraception was illegal until 1985, and abortion only legalised in 2018. Unmarried women who became pregnant were considered sinners and punished. Their offspring were thought unworthy of burial in consecrated ground.

Although part of daily experiences, aspects of the truth hidden in the homes began to emerge in 1975, when two boys discovered child

remains while playing nearby the closed Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway. The home had been run by an order of nuns, the Bon Secours Sisters, between 1925-1961. The home was a former workhouse. In 2013, local historian Catherine Corless, researching the "staggering number of children [who] lost their lives in the home", collated death certificates of 798 children. The recorded causes of death were congenital debilities, infectious diseases and malnutrition. Corless, however, could not find records of where the infants were buried. Ever since, the church, state and political establishment have been seeking to delay investigation into circumstances of the lives and death of the women and children forced through the homes.

In 2017, the fifth interim report of the Commission confirmed a mass burial site in the grounds of the Tuam home, containing remains of 786 children—from premature babies to three-year-old toddlers. The skeletons lay in a converted septic tank. One child died there every two weeks between the 1920s and 1960s. After the final report was published, Bon Secours Sisters belatedly issued an apology, admitting their behaviour "did not live up to our Christianity".

Bon Secours Health System CLG is currently the largest independent hospital provider in Ireland and one of the largest in the United States. Some 50 hospitals and "1,000 sites of care" are also operating in Ohio, Kentucky, Maryland and Virginia.

Another home investigated was Bessborough mother and baby home in Cork, where 900 children died. The commission report concludes that it is highly likely that hundreds of burials took place in the 200-acre estate surrounding the home. Bessborough was run until 1998 by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The Commission found that of 923 infants who died at the site, proper burial records exist for only 64. The building is currently slated for development into flats.

The highest mortality rate was at Sean Ross Abbey (1931 to 1969), in County Tipperary, where 1,090 infants out of 6,079 died. The report cites evidence from a local carpenter asked to provide coffins for children born to daughters of "respectable" fathers. Others were buried in quick lime.

The Commission's 2,865 page-long final report—belatedly published January 12—writes, "The very high rate of infant mortality... is probably the most disquieting feature of these institutions. The death rate among 'illegitimate' children was always considerably higher

than that among 'legitimate' children but it was higher still in mother and baby homes: in the years 1945-46, the death rate among infants in mother and baby homes was almost twice that of the national average for 'illegitimate' children."

Infants at the homes were also the subject of illegal medical experiments. These were carried out either by the Wellcome Foundation or Glaxo Laboratories, who subsequently merged to form British owned pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK). Experiments included multiple trials of diphtheria, measles and various combined vaccines between 1930 and 1973. The commission found that trials carried out at seven institutions were unlicensed, unregulated and "illegal and unethical even by the standards of the time". The trials would have been found in breach of the Nuremberg Code on medical experimentation established after exposure of Nazi medical experiments in the aftermath of World War Two.

Point one of the code states, "The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential."

The report claims "no evidence of injury" resulted from the experiments, but survivors dispute this on the basis of there having been no follow up contact from the experimenters. The last available figures for GSK reported £9 billion profit on £33.8 billion turnover, the company operates in 95 countries.

The report also documents adoption from the homes, the scale of which has been slowly emerging over the years. Sean Ross Abbey, for example, exported 134 babies for adoption as late as 1969. Only 25 children went back to their mothers. 1,638 children were placed for international adoption, of whom 1,427 went to the United States. Others went to Britain, Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia and other countries. The report found the church organised the US adoptions, even though "it had no formal legal or regulatory role in either foreign or domestic adoptions." The report found that concerns about adoptions were raised in individual circumstances as early as 1952.

Numbers of women who spoke to the commission reported being forced to hand over their children for adoption. One said her son had "been taken without her knowledge or consent". She remains "in a lifelong battle' to discover how this came about and who was responsible."

Others say they were illiterate when they supposedly signed adoption papers. The report noted mothers explaining "that their most searing memory of their time in a mother and baby home was that of the screams of women looking through a window, through which she could see her child being driven away to a destination unknown; for many, there had not been a chance to say goodbye."

The Commission reports witness statements of the survivors, which are harrowing as well as telling. They begin on page 2,405.

As soon as an unmarried pregnancy was noticed a priest was informed, and the girl whisked away to one of the mother and baby homes. Here she endured hard physical labour, including scrubbing floors, poor food and sometimes physical abuse.

Some worked in the Magdalene Laundries run first by the Protestant but later mainly the Catholic Church. These were commercial enterprises and the "fallen" women were unpaid. Some spent the rest of their lives there. The inhumane conditions of these workhouses, which operated until the 1980s, were graphically depicted in the 2002 film, the Magdalene Sisters .

In the homes, "no contact with families or the outside world" was permitted. Even when fathers turned up to marry the girls, they were turned away. Witnesses reported "emotional abuse, denigration and derogatory remarks."

In the Tuam home, 12 mothers died due to complications during delivery with nuns acting as midwives. The witnesses speak of childbirth without a doctor or pain relief, even during episiotomies (incisions in the perineum to widen the birth canal). The nuns said this was "punishment" for their sins.

After childbirth, bonding between mother and child was discouraged. The new mother was instructed to "feed, change, put down." Adoption was pursued relentlessly from the 1960s, with pressure placed on the mother to accept. It was not until 1973 that an unmarried mothers' allowance was introduced, enabling mothers to bring up their babies in the community.

Survivors tell of childhood without love or toys. Those not adopted were sent to the Industrial Schools as slave labour or worked on farms. Later, walls of silence impeded children finding parents or vice versa, as portrayed in the 2013 heart-wrenching film *Philomena* , starring Judi Dench and Steve Coogan.

Despite all the evidence of what was effectively church and state organised murder by neglect, kidnapping and vast psychological and physical abuse the report concludes that the main fault lay with... men. "Responsibility for that harsh treatment rests mainly with the fathers of their children and their own immediate families."

This was merely "supported by, contributed to, and condoned by, the institutions of the State and the Churches..."

Issuing a formal but empty apology, current Taoiseach, Micheál Martin conceded, "The Irish State, as the main funding authority for the majority of these institutions, had the ultimate ability to exert control over these institutions, in addition to its duty of care to protect citizens with a robust regulatory and inspection regime. This authority was not exerted and the State's duty of care was not upheld."

In terms of further response, Martin restricted himself to accepting the report's paltry recommendations, which amounted to proposals for better access to such records as remain available and some limited financial redress, a process which will drag on for years and will only apply to women resident in the homes before 1973. The report noted that a scheme set up for victims of the Magdalene Laundries had, by September 2020 distributed just €31.95 million to 803 applicants.



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