

Workhouse Mothers Betrayed

As the investigation into Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries, and Workhouses in Northern Ireland moves forward, a fresh injustice is emerging, one that risks repeating the silencing of some of the very women this process is meant to honour.

Officials in The Executive Office (TEO) have confirmed that a standardised upfront payment will be offered to women and children who went through Mother and Baby Institutions and Magdalene Laundries. But women who were placed in Workhouses as unmarried mothers, many of whom lost their babies to forced separation/adoption, will not be eligible.

In November 2021, the Executive accepted the recommendations of the *Truth, Acknowledgement and Accountability* Report and agreed to implement them in full, including standardised redress for Workhouse victims. Since then, the draft legislation has been published detailing the scheme for payment, and women who were in workhouses are not included. Officials argue if they give redress to women who gave birth in the workhouse, they will also have to give redress to the men, the elderly, children, and the destitute who were also in the workhouse. To single out unmarried mothers, they claim, would treat them differently from other residents.

But this reasoning misses the point. Poverty and destitution were indeed the fate of many Workhouse residents. This inquiry is not investigating poverty and destitution. It is investigating something more specific: moral condemnation, coercion, and the forced, traumatic separation from their children, which was endured by the women who were institutionalised in the workhouse and gave birth there and who are the subject of this Inquiry. Their suffering was not incidental but targeted and gendered, rooted in stigma, shame, misogyny and control.

Historical records show that unmarried mothers in the workhouse had to work hard “scrubbing floors and washing clothes” for no money. This was forced labour and they were treated very badly just for being unmarried mothers.

TEO officials argue that Workhouse infirmaries functioned as maternity hospitals for both married and unmarried women, and so it would be unfair to give redress only the unmarried. But this is a false equivalence. For most married women, giving birth in a Workhouse infirmary was a medical event; for unmarried women, it was a social and moral sentence. The shame imposed by family, church, and state on both the woman and the child born out of wedlock combined with the likelihood of separation of the woman from her child, made their experience wholly different.

Officials argue that some married women in the Workhouse infirmary experienced stigmatised pregnancies (from rape or affairs), and that unmarried mothers with older children were admitted, with children of all backgrounds “boarded out” by the Poor Law Union Board of Guardians.

These arguments do not justify exclusion. While other women faced hardship, the systematic harm to unmarried mothers was distinct: moralised judgement, gendered coercion, and a high likelihood of forced separation from their babies. Recognising

unmarried mothers does not diminish the suffering of others, it corrects a historically ignored, gendered injustice. Singling out one group of women – those in workhouses – for exclusion from the redress scheme because it is complicated to include them offends principles of natural justice. It is simply unfair and discriminatory.

Such exclusion draws an arbitrary line in history. That line rules out the workhouse women, and, because the redress scheme does not allow for posthumous payments to families of those excluded, the injustice passes on to the next generation of their relatives.

Redress schemes are not just about money. They are about recognition. To exclude Workhouse mothers and their children is to send a message that some experiences of forced adoption and institutional abuse matter, while others do not. It risks perpetuating the very invisibility that these inquiries were meant to overcome.

If the state is serious about truth and acknowledgement, then all unmarried mothers who lost their babies through coercion, regardless of the type of institution or building, must be treated with equal dignity. Anything less compounds the injustice survivors have already carried for decades.