

## The treatment of solo mothers in Belfast during the twentieth century

In January 1903, Miss Cassie Mc., listed as a single, prima - in her first pregnancy - patient, gave birth to twins in the maternity ward of the Belfast workhouse. Her first infant was born in a healthy condition at 10.30pm on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January. The second twin, however, was not born until 10.30am on the 26<sup>th</sup> January. There was no note on her medical record of Cassie receiving any form of pain relief during labour, nor any use of medication, such as croton oil, to help move childbirth along, despite there being evidence that the workhouse maternity ward had a supply of this. Cassie endured a forceps birth without pain medication to deliver her second child which, sadly, was stillborn. Had she received more appropriate medical attention to move labour along, it is arguable that the outcome may have been very different. This is just one example of solo mothers in Belfast during the twentieth century receiving inadequate maternity care. In fact, in 1903 40.8 percent of all solo mothers that gave birth in the maternity ward of Belfast workhouse had complications listed on their medical notes, compared to just 23.9 percent of married women.<sup>1</sup>

Gender-based violence does not only encompass physical or sexual harm, but also societal attitudes and prejudices. Solo mothers, mothers who were not married when they gave birth, have had to face stigma and social exclusion, arguably in both the past and present, for failing to uphold the moral values of their society, government, or religion. Indeed, the fact that so many of these girls and women were referred to as 'unmarried mothers' reinforces such prejudice. Terms like 'unmarried mother' or 'single mother' inherently convey disapproval at the situation these girls and women found themselves in, often being

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<sup>1</sup> Record of Cases in the Maternity Hospital, January 1901- December 1907 BG/7/KC/1: PRONI. This could range from haemorrhaging following childbirth, a retained placenta, or prolonged labour that resulted in either the use of forceps or a caesarean section.

associated 'with negative baggage.'<sup>2</sup> The gender bias surrounding pregnancy outside marriage also cannot be overstated. Conceiving a child out of wedlock was unequivocally 'blamed' on women, and pregnancy was evidence of their sexual deviance. Yet very little, if any, criticism was placed on the men who also played a role in conceiving a child. Certainly, while we are now becoming more aware of Mother and Baby Institutions and Magdalene Laundries, and the treatment women received within these institutions, we also know that no institution attempted to control the sex lives of men.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that all solo mothers had or have negative experiences, but what my research into maternal welfare in Belfast between 1900 and 1974 shows is that girls and women who became pregnant outside of wedlock faced harsh criticism from their families and from wider society.

An article signed 'Disgusted' which appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1963 is an apt example of the discrimination fathers of infants born outside wedlock were able to escape. It is also one of the few instances where we hear the voice of a solo mother, rather than reading about their experiences through official records like those for the Belfast workhouse, official reports, or government legislation. The solo mother that penned the article writes how the father of her child had promised to marry her, yet 'backed out last minute.' She goes on to criticise him for joining the army to shirk his responsibility describing him, and others like him, as 'irresponsible and immature mothers' boys.' To end her article, the woman recounts 'the mental agonies that [solo mothers] go through' which in her opinion 'are a clear enough price to pay,' and saying it was unfair that 'chicken-hearted fathers can strut about as if nothing had

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Frank Houghton, "Flying Solo: Single/Unmarried Mothers and Stigma in Ireland," *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* 21 no. 1 (2004): 36-37 who points out that the use of the terms 'single mother' and 'unmarried mother' 'are often used in a pejorative manner and come with associated negative "baggage."' He argues that to overcome the prejudice associated with these terms, we should instead refer to this group of mothers as 'solo mothers.'

<sup>3</sup> See for example Leanne McCormick, Sean O'Connell, Oliva Dee and John Privilege, *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalen Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922 and 1990 Report* (2021).

happened, whereas the unfortunate girls are left to fend for themselves.' The stigma attached to pregnancies outside of marriage were made clear, and the attitudes of a society toward girls and women who became pregnant out of wedlock were something men did not have to contend with. The gender bias in connection with this topic, and gender-based violence in terms of societal attitude, beliefs and opinions, is undeniable.

The hold that shame and reputation had on Irish society, north and south, during the twentieth century was clear, and pregnancy outside marriage could lead to a family rejecting their daughter for her sexual transgression. This, unfortunately, could lead to extreme reactions from family members, including acts of physical violence. A report conducted by the NSPCC in 1913 detailed twenty-nine cases of girls and women being thrown out of their homes, losing their jobs, having to 'leave the neighbourhood because of the disgrace,' and using the workhouse as a place of refuge once their pregnancy became known.<sup>4</sup>

(23).—Turned out of her home by her parents, a girl is now dependent on charity. The father of her baby refuses assistance. Prior to the birth of the child the girl was earning 9s. per week.

(27).—Having to leave the neighbourhood because of the disgrace, a servant girl placed her child to nurse. The father refused to help. When the child was 12 months

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<sup>4</sup> *Beyond the Law: Some Facts on Illegitimacy in Ireland*, (1913): 10-12.

21).—A servant girl was driven to the workhouse by her coming trouble. Believing in the promise to help her made by the father of her child, she took her discharge when the baby was a month old. Meeting with disappointment, she again went to service, where she is earning very little more than the 4s. per week she is paying for the care of her child.

Some examples of women who became pregnant outside marriage and the hardships they faced. Source: *Beyond the Law: Some Facts on Illegitimacy in Ireland*, (1913): 10-12.

On top of this, the recently published report into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland between 1922 and 1990 includes testimonies of women who were at risk of physical harm once their pregnancy became known. In the case of PW, who became pregnant in the 1970s, it was left to her mother to tell PW's father of her pregnancy. Her mother warned her to 'get into the bathroom, lock yourself in the bathroom and don't come out till I tell you to. No matter what he says you stay in there,' alluding to a high chance of a violent reaction to the news. The fact that we have reports in 1913 that detail violent reactions to pregnancy outside marriage, as well as recent testimony of women who were at risk of physical violence from their family members in the 1970s, shows that little progress was made during this time on attitudes towards solo mothers, and the fear and isolation they faced once their pregnancies became known.

Girls and women who found themselves pregnant outside marriage in Belfast were subject to criticism and condemnation within society. They not only faced discrimination and isolation, but sadly at times were subject to physical abuse. We are becoming more aware of the treatment solo mothers faced across the island of Ireland during the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the work of the Truth Recovery Independent Panel. [Independent Panel Truth Recovery NI](#)

However, there needs to be a wider recognition and an awareness that women who became pregnant outside marriage faced harsh criticism simply for having sex outside wedlock. Many of these women are still with us today, and they deserve the respect that they weren't shown when they became pregnant. Irish society, north and south, unfairly condemned the sex lives of women, and the condemnation they faced must be acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>

### Bio

Caitlín Smith is a PhD researcher at Ulster University. Her research focuses on maternal and infant welfare in Belfast during the twentieth century and considers whether women in Belfast were at a disadvantage in terms of maternity care compared to women in other cities across Ireland and Britain.

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<sup>6</sup> This has occurred to some extent. For example, apologies for the treatment these women were subjected to were given in a Northern Ireland Assembly sitting in January 2021. However, we need to acknowledge that the treatment of solo mothers, and the use of mother and baby institutions, occurred because society used them and held these discriminatory opinions. See "NI mother-and-baby homes: Investigation promised into 'significant wrongs', *BBC* 26 January 2021. [NI mother-and-baby homes: Investigation promised into 'significant wrongs' - BBC News](#)