

Survivor Group at Dept of Children & Equality express concern over Mother and Baby Home Report Focus and Leak

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Some members of the Collaborative Forum¹, a specially selected group of Mother and Baby/County & Bethany Homes survivors, appointed by the FG/Independents government in 2018 to advise the Dept of Children, Equality, Integration & Youth Affairs on issues of concern to survivors, today expressed their anger and dismay that a Sunday newspaper has been granted sight of the “Report on Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters” 3 days ahead of the survivors, who will only see the report for the first time on January 12th.

Of further concern is the tone and content of the article, in the Sunday Independent, which highlights the more trivial aspects of how mothers and their children were treated in the institutions under investigation, e.g. focusing on mothers being forced to clean floors rather on the fact that their children were forcibly and illegally taken for the Irish adoption industry, which included the trafficking of children across international borders to the USA and Northern Ireland in particular.

Members of the Forum, some of whom have not yet been invited to the official webinar to launch the report on Tuesday, January 12th, stressed that the leaked segments suggested a trivialisation of the worst traumas endured by the mothers and their children, that of being permanently separated from each other and in the case of the children, being permanently deprived of their families of origin, their identities and from ever knowing how they came to be separated from their mothers.

A detailed report commissioned by Minister for Children, Katherine Zappone in 2018 from the Collaborative Forum, made up entirely of survivors has never been published and Zappone’s successor, Minister Roderic O’Gorman has not yet communicated with the forum members, other than to issue 2 apologies; the first for not consulting them over his rushed legislation around a digital archive in November 2020 and today the second apology for the leaking of the report before the survivors have even received their “summary copy” due in 2 days time.

One Forum member, Susan Lohan, who chaired the sub-committee on “Identity and Information” said that they hoped the detailed recommendations, contained within their unpublished 2018 report, would now be given serious consideration by government, without any further delay. Key amongst the recommendations was for all survivors to be given unfettered access to their personal information, their birth certs, their files and early care records in a newly established dedicated archive, which would also act as a national education centre, “lest we forget”.² It was also recommended that survivors would receive an enhanced medical card and be given access to comprehensive health screening, funded by the Irish State. Finally, both regional and national memorial sites were envisioned in collaboration with survivors and artists, where annual memorial services could take place.

Some members of Forum are also concerned that there is no government nor public recognition that this report only covers some of the victims of Ireland’s Forced Adoption Industry and excludes the thousands of mothers who gave birth in State Maternity Hospitals, private nursing homes etc, whose children were similarly taken for forced adoption by so-called state regulated adoption agencies and suffered the same human rights abuse as those caught up in the institutions investigated by the Commission.

Cork Forum member, Fiona Ward said that there was “no question about the inter-connectiveness of the system, which as communicated to government in a confidential report as part of the Inter-Departmental Review on State Involvement in Magdalene Laundries, saw children and mothers treated by religious orders as little more than tradeable commodities to be moved by those in authority between institutions and across international borders.”³

¹ See <https://assets.gov.ie/26509/151c60db4c104709b10237016efdd77f.pdf>

² The former Magdalene Laundry at Sean McDermott St has been suggested by various survivor groups such as Justice For Magdalenes Research, Adoption Rights Alliance & the Collaborative Forum as a potential site. For the past year a group of architects and academic scholars, together with Justice for Magdalenes, have been working voluntarily to facilitate the emergence of a collective vision for the site of the former laundry. You can read more about this voluntary project here: www.openheartcitydublin.ie.

³ See <https://conallofatharta.wordpress.com/>

She added that it was unconscionable that tens of thousands of survivors would find no reference to their traumas in the report and therefore had little chance of receiving justice for their human rights abuses before they died.

Mary Harney, who travels from Maine in the US to attend Forum meetings, was born in the Bessborough “Mother and Baby Home” in Cork in 1949, expressed her fear that the report would gloss over the entirely unregulated fostering of children such as herself, where wholesale neglect and routine brutality towards children as young as two, were regarded as acceptable for “illegitimate” children. Ms Harney, was eventually removed from these “parents” and was taken to court, where at age 5, she was sentenced to incarceration in an industrial school until she reached 16 years of age.

UK Forum member, Rosemary Adaser, who is of Irish and Ghanian heritage (although she was told for decades that her father was Nigerian, despite his correct nationality and address being recorded on her file), was in two of the institutions named in the report, first as an infant and then as an unmarried mother, her infant baby was taken to a third institution. Due to her ethnicity, Ms Adaser was deemed by the nuns to be an unsuitable candidate for adoption and as a result spent her childhood being bounced between various industrial schools and unvetted foster homes.

She said, “what I find shocking was the casual crushing of the mothers’ human rights revealed through the trafficking of women and infants within Ireland. The Mother and Baby 'Homes' were the Irish equivalent of the Soviet Gulag system in which mothers and their children were incarcerated to be forgotten; set adrift in a sea of stigma and shame”.

Ms Lohan said that many of the Forum members were fearful that the Commission will have ignored the main issues of family destruction, social engineering, ethnic cleansing or trafficking that were at the core of the “homes” operations and that it will have instead focused on less serious issues such as poor diet, enforced labour etc. She said, “although these are serious issues if looked at in isolation, no “home” survivor ever led with narratives of their daily routines over the loss of their mother or child”.

All of the Forum members, who contributed to the statement, said that nothing less than extraordinary action on the part of this FG/FF/Green coalition government to enact the recommendations of the Forum, including but not limited to effective consultation with survivors regarding legislation and compensation, would be acceptable and that the Irish public, Irish Opposition Parties and International Human Rights groups were firmly on the side of survivors.

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