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“I felt I should be there, all these people talking on my behalf without consulting me”: Gender, Experience and Expertise in the Irish Mixed Economy of Welfare, 1970–1990s*

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A small peripheral island on the edge of Europe, the Republic of Ireland did not urbanise until the end of the 1960s, a transformation which coincided with the introduction of free second-level education and the arrival of second-wave feminism.¹ While Ireland entered the 1970s as a comparatively poor, young, conservative and religious country by Western European standards, it was on the cusp of profound demographic and sociocultural changes that would redefine it by the end of the century. Second-wave feminism had been gathering steam since the 1960s, however, the Irishwomen’s Liberation Movement (IWLM) literally burst on to the public scene on 6 March 1971 when it was launched on the country’s most popular television chat show, *The Late Late Show*.² The movement had its work cut out for it: the republic represented a laggard in the most basic areas of women’s rights. When the IWLM was drawing up its manifesto *Irishwomen: Chains or Change*, one member, the poet Eavan Boland, rang the young feminist lawyer and future president of Ireland Mary Robinson to ask for seven examples of legal discrimination against women, to which Robinson responded:³ “Why only seven?”⁴ Birth control, divorce and abortion remained illegal, working women and mothers were discriminated against in a range of ways. According to the 1966 census, only 34 percent of women (aged 15–64) were “gainfully employed” and of those only 6 percent were married women,⁵ a marriage bar remained in force in the civil and public service until 1973, and persisted informally for many more years.⁶ While the Irish Constitution of 1937 vowed “to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”,⁷ the relatively paltry children’s allowances (1944) were paid to fathers and few practical measures targeted stay-at-home mothers.⁸ The tax and welfare systems were inherently gender biased, and a sexual double standard pervaded and informed every aspect of official Ireland from health to justice. The Irish economic structure was unapologetically one in which financial survival depended on a working man’s wage. The

reality, however, was that thousands of single-headed female households were forced to eke out an existence in the Irish mixed economy of welfare.⁹ So much female energy was expended on making ends meet that few had the time to look up and see the system that held this inequality in place, never mind challenge it.

A month after the launch of the IWLM, hundreds of women crowded into Dublin's Mansion House to declare the beginnings of their fight for "liberation".¹⁰ A founding member of the movement, June Levine recalled in her 1982 memoir:

At one stage I counted a line of fifty-two people. It was a moving experience. We had known those women were out there, but not so many, so willing to share their life's experiences and their views with us ... The sight of them brought me up in goose bumps, the sound of them the ultimate confirmation if we needed it that we Irish women needed liberation.¹¹

Decades of pain, exclusion and discrimination echoed off the walls of that chamber, but the word used most often to describe the emotion that evening was "rage". Rage that there had not been rage before, rage that women were held in place by a system that then blamed them for its worst failings.¹² Woman after woman recorded their experiences as deserted wives, widows and/or mothers, struggling to make ends meet, of the impact of no legal birth control and of unhappy marriages from which there was no legal escape.¹³ Levine recalled "it was to be remembered as the night the first Irish unmarried mother declared herself publicly",¹⁴ when a young woman took the microphone to declare: "I am an unmarried mother." Such was the social magnitude of this declaration, the bravery of those words in public, that the room erupted in applause. Levine admitted she "hadn't ever seen one before and stretched my neck to get a better look".¹⁵ Nell McCafferty, another key member of the movement, claimed: "That single sentence was our epiphany. You could feel, hear and see the dam break."¹⁶ What was rupturing was the story of Ireland as a "holy place", which was increasingly being challenged, largely by female voices, with an alternative narrative of Ireland as a "hypocritical place". A country that valorised the family, but ostracised its most vulnerable women and children, a country with no legal abortion services on its shores, but a steady number of Irish women availing of those services elsewhere or having their children adopted without proper consent.¹⁷

While the IWLM group fractured relatively quickly over disagreements concerning tactics, the women's movement continued to reshape the country over the proceeding decades.¹⁸ Sociologist Linda Connolly identifies three strands to the movement: service groups, single-issue campaigns and political action. She cites Cherish as an example of one of these service groups.¹⁹ Started by unmarried mothers for unmarried mothers, Cherish focused on supporting women to keep and raise their children, despite all the official, economic and sociocultural pressures to opt for adoption. It has received relatively little academic attention as most of the focus has been on the treatment of unmarried

mothers prior to the introduction of the statutory unmarried mothers' allowance in 1973.²⁰ This is in part due to the mistaken assumption that this (meagre) allowance freed unmarried mothers from the clutches of religious institutions and wider moralisation.²¹ Finally, the relative neglect of this organisation stems from a failure to consider it as part of the women's movement and a significant player in the sociocultural changes happening in 1970s.²² This article explores how Cherish subverted the contemporary Irish understanding of a welfare organisation, by pioneering a “self-help concept”.²³ It argues that its “client as peers” approach was a principle and a *modus operandi*, which was essential to its sociopolitical agenda to end the moral stigma associated with unmarried motherhood, remove the legal and social status of illegitimacy and, ultimately, establish the single-parent family as legitimate and viable.²⁴ It explores how Cherish was both a symptom of and a vital contributor to changes occurring in the mixed economy of welfare in the republic between the late 1960s and 1990s. These changes were influenced by ideas of participative democracy and protest.²⁵ While it represented an important constituent in the welfare landscape, its main aim was to transform the political and social attitudes to unmarried mothers so that women no longer needed to avail of services aimed at moral reform, secrecy and/or adoption. However, its own learning curve was significant with, for example, its attitudes to sexual behaviour and abortion revealing the degree to which it was also an association of its time.

Unmarried mothers and the mixed economy of welfare

By the early 1970s much of the Republic of Ireland's mixed economy of welfare for unmarried mothers harked back to the religious and moral dispensation of the nineteenth century. Under the poor law of the 1830s, single mothers were entitled to care within the workhouse, although they were contrasted negatively with widowed mothers as the “undeserving poor”. As a result, many were also catered for in Magdalene laundries or asylums, initially operated by Protestant women for the moral rescue/reform of prostitutes, but which by the twentieth century were almost exclusively run by Roman Catholic nuns.²⁶ While these institutions were ostensibly to cater for women deemed to have “fallen” morally, including unmarried mothers, in fact women and girls were incarcerated for a wide range of reasons from the death of a mother to sexual assault. The charity market was marked by religious division and suspicion, thus the voluntary organisations dealing with unmarried mothers were explicitly denominational and wary of each other.²⁷ On the eve of Irish political independence in 1922, the rate of pregnancy outside marriage was recorded as 2.6 percent, or 1,520 births, and the majority was catered for in workhouses.²⁸ The new Irish government, anxious to remove unmarried mothers from the poor law system, and therefore its direct remit, turned to the religious orders to run designated homes, workhouses (renamed county homes in 1925) as well as to open new homes targeting the “better class of girls”.²⁹ It considered that the Magdalene asylums should be used for the

“intractable problem” of the “repeat offenders”, a reference to women who had had more than one pregnancy outside marriage.³⁰ The state’s response to unmarried mothers was inflected by class and moral concerns, but driven by the fear that these women “were in danger of becoming a permanent burden on the ratepayers or of drifting into a life of degradation”.³¹ Thus, in the 1920s various Catholic orders opened a number of private mother and baby homes, as well as managing three designated county homes and the Magdalene network. In many of these homes women gave birth to their children and stayed from anywhere between three months to life, depending on the institution, the time and other factors.³² This system was funded by local governments and private payments by some women. However, the county homes continued to represent a crucial component of this “system”. Almost all these homes were informed by a widely shared sociocultural belief that unmarried mothers and their children did not constitute legitimate families.³³ The emphasis was on moral and crisis management; success was defined as morally chastened and socially rehabilitated women and adopted children. The overwhelming majority of babies born outside marriage were adopted, often without the free or informed consent of the mothers.³⁴ By the late 1960s, Ireland had the highest rate of adoption in Europe, with 90 percent of children born outside marriage being adopted.³⁵

It was not until considerable numbers of Irish women began seeking abortions in Britain, after its legalisation in 1967, that those involved in the provision of social services for the unmarried mother considered reform.³⁶ Writing in late 1972, the feminist journalist Mary Maher noted that “the International Conference on Planned Parenthood revealed earlier this year, Irishwomen have proportionately more abortions under the English Abortion Act, 1967, than women from any other European country”.³⁷ While a social survey estimated that in 1974, the rate of Irish abortions in Britain was 49.6 percent of every 100 illegitimate birth, by 1981 this had risen to 73.6 percent.³⁸ This motivated one new programme, Ally, initiated by a Dominican priest and philosopher, Fergal O’Connor, which placed pregnant unmarried mothers with host families until the adoption of their baby. The main motivation was to reduce “Ireland’s world record-breaking export figures for pregnant refugees”.³⁹ O’Connor was also one of the instigators of a large conference on the unmarried mother, held in 1971, involving many of the key groups and organisations involved in the care of unmarried mothers.⁴⁰ The conference proceedings reveal a growing sense that the response to unmarried mothers was “more appropriate to the last century”, and a shift to framing this cohort as “citizens” with “rights,” rather than “problems” with “needs”: “They are citizens who have a right to help because they are citizens. It is a question not only of compassion but of social right.” This led the conference to conclude that the unmarried mother’s “fundamental right as a human being” was to keep her child.⁴¹ However, it also conceded that there were few real attempts to vindicate that right in Ireland.

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The conference’s aim of establishing a central council for the unmarried mother and her child was opposed by the Catholic Church. Maher noted that Monsignor Cecil Barrett, the chairman of the Central Council of Catholic Adoption Societies, had urged Catholic organisations to oppose such a secular federation. He wanted to ensure that services remained focused on the spiritual rehabilitation of the mother and, crucially, the adoption of her child.⁴² Maher pointed out that there was no statutory help to enable unmarried mothers to keep their child, most remained reliant on services which continued to be “organised almost completely on sectarian lines, and largely under the authority of religious”.⁴³ However, she detected that the momentum had moved from the usual providers of services to the unmarried mothers themselves. “Circumstances are changing,” she wrote, “the women concerned are taking decisions that were once difficult or impossible. Like it or not, it is the unmarried mothers themselves who have abandoned the status quo, and there is nothing to be gained but a great deal to be lost by ignoring this reality. Perhaps it is time Msgr. Barrett reconsidered?”⁴⁴ The evidence of this change was a small group of women meeting in Dublin with the intention of “forming an association of single mothers”, and Maher hoped that “when they crystallise their programme ... they get the full support of the society which has neglected them for so long”.⁴⁵

Cherish: Unmarried mothers for unmarried mothers

Maher was referring to Maura O’Dea and a group of six other unmarried mothers, all determined to keep and raise their children, who had been meeting throughout 1972.⁴⁶ O’Dea, tired of priests, nuns and social workers speaking for the “unmarried mother”, recalled: “I felt I should be there, all these people talking on my behalf without consulting me.”⁴⁷ While she appreciated the attention the IWLM brought to the difficulties of unmarried mothers, she left her first meeting of this group when the discussion turned to which types of unmarried mothers they were willing to help, a reference to moral character.⁴⁸ Indeed, the IWLM 1971 manifesto had called for a “central organisation which will help and rehabilitate the unmarried mother”,⁴⁹ an indication of how deep the moral framing of female sexuality ran. However, O’Dea was undoubtedly enabled by the women’s movement in her rejection of the idea that others, without lived experience, could be experts on how women like her should live their lives.

On 6 March 1973, a letter by O’Dea’s group, entitled “Calling Unmarried Mothers”, was published in several newspapers. It read: “We are a group of unmarried mothers who have mostly kept our babies. We meet regularly and our aim is to make representation to the Government on behalf of all women in our position to obtain recognition of this very serious social problem.”⁵⁰ Immediately, women around Ireland began to telephone O’Dea’s Dublin house, their “tentative voices asking who we were and what we had to offer”.⁵¹ The answer was Cherish, an organisation with three core aims: to provide mutual support to each other, to get to know as many unmarried mothers as possible, and to pressure the

government into providing support to unmarried mothers.⁵² These aims centred the expertise of experience, the value and importance of community formation, and active lobbying for policy change. The association's name was inspired by the Irish nationalist 1916 "Proclamation of the Irish Republic", which had vowed to cherish all the children of the nation equally.⁵³ Its choice was indicative of the establishment and effectiveness of the emerging feminist narrative of Ireland as a hypocritical place. The nation clearly did not cherish all the children equally and exploiting the gap between rhetoric and reality was a key strategy of the women's movement. Indeed, O'Dea recalls this period as akin to a feminist consciousness raising: "Every fortnight the meetings continued. As more women came our thoughts began to crystallize and it became clear that reformation was not what we wanted and needed, it was revolution. The whole system needed changing."⁵⁴ Thus, from the outset, Cherish entered the mixed economy of welfare to fundamentally change it and the lives of the women who encountered it.

Cherish finished 1973 as a registered company with Mary Robinson, whose reputation as a pioneering legal reformer was growing by the year, as its president. It also recorded its first lobbying success with the introduction of a statutory unmarried mothers' allowance.⁵⁵ Indicating an understanding of where the power lay in 1970s Ireland, Cherish had lobbied "Government Ministers, Archbishops, Bishops and Clergy of all denominations", recording: "We feel we had a bit to do with getting the allowance".⁵⁶ For Cherish this payment also represented "the first official recognition of the existence of the unmarried mother and her child".⁵⁷ Once the state acknowledged the unmarried mother's right to a welfare payment when she kept her child, it de facto recognised this unit as a family with specific and legitimate needs. By the end of the 1970s, the organisation employed two social workers and had secured some state funding, although never enough; for example, in 1980 it reported that despite receiving £11,000 funding from statutory bodies, its expenditure had been £40,000.⁵⁸

Over the proceeding decades much of Cherish's work involved guiding unmarried mothers through the maze that was the Irish welfare and charity landscape. This was sensitive and painstaking work and often involved dealing with deeply distressed, scared and vulnerable people, who had no easy options before them. Thus, while Cherish was nondenominational and seeking to fundamentally change the moral basis of much of the support provided to unmarried mothers, it had to engage with all the players in the mixed economy of welfare. This meant developing a working relationship with the religious-run mother and baby homes, Fr O'Connor of Ally, the Protestant Aid Association,⁵⁹ Rotunda Girls Aid Society,⁶⁰ Catholic Protection and Rescue Society, St Patrick's Guild,⁶¹ maternity hospitals, various statutory health boards and local authority housing departments throughout the country. Many of the letters written and received by Cherish concerned practicalities, such as where to give birth, how to keep it a secret, how to organise adoption,

abortion or, increasingly, how to keep the baby. Cherish either assisted women directly or referred them to the relevant existing welfare/charitable organisation. It attended court to support women through affiliation order proceedings or wrote to a landlord seeking fairer rents.⁶² Although, its primary focus was supporting women who wished to keep their children, from the outset Cherish offered nondirective support and advice to all unmarried mothers, including those who opted for adoption. It bore witness to the heartache of that decision, as well as supporting women who kept their children, often staying in contact for years. It distilled and articulated the main obstacles facing unmarried mothers: income inequality, a lack of affordable housing, social prejudice, discrimination, isolation and loneliness, all of which were because of deeply engrained sexism.

However, Cherish was also of its time, for example, throughout the 1970s and 1980s it remained its policy not to refer women who wished to have abortions in Britain. However, its reasoning and the situation was complex and fluid. It was, for example, concerned abortion referral might become its main business, particularly as more and more women were requesting such information.⁶³ Furthermore, the legal situation in the republic became increasingly restrictive due to the 1983 constitutional ban on abortion and a 1987 High Court judgement. The latter effectively banned the provision of information, advice or referrals in relation to abortion services outside the state.⁶⁴ In 1987 the chairperson's report recorded: "Cherish is deeply concerned at this threat to the freedom of information, and we wish to add our voice to those of all the other women's groups who have protested against it."⁶⁵ It also regarded the Irish ban on abortion as hypocritical when "Irish abortions still continue. Irish women, made pregnant by Irish men, having abortions in England are still an Irish responsibility."⁶⁶ However, there is little doubt that there were also moral reasons for its antireferral position. O'Dea's reflects upon this in her memoir noting that she was "very anti-abortion", she felt it was a major "interference in a woman's physical, emotional and psychological life".⁶⁷ She explained:

We had set ourselves up for the purpose of helping women to keep their children. Any money we collected was for that purpose. If we got into the business of giving women information on abortion then I felt that we should state that clearly in all our publicity and take the consequences.⁶⁸

In 1970s and 1980s Ireland the "consequences" would have been significant. In its position, Cherish was similar to most other women's organisations. As Connolly notes, with the exception of the Irish Women United and Women's Right to Choose group, few "confronted the Irish abortion rate *systematically* as a feminist issue".⁶⁹ Interestingly, O'Dea described this antiabortion position as a "painful business", recalling the case of one 18-year-old woman with a "very catholic mother", who had sent daughter to arrange her own abortion. O'Dea admitted that she did not helped the girl: "Deliberately, I actually didn't have the information. But I could easily have gotten it. What code, what fear, what power prevented me from helping that young woman? Was it different from her mother's?"⁷⁰

Cherish also expressed concern about the rising number of women having more than one child outside of marriage, indicating the endurance of a moral distinction between women with one child outside marriage and those with more than one child. This moral categorisation was often code for class concerns and a belief that working-class sexuality was inherently problematic and led to welfare dependence. Cherish was concerned about the “welfare scrounger trope” that was emerging strongly by the early 1980s, which it resisted as insidious and profoundly unfair. It was also all too aware of the practical obstacles faced by unmarried mothers with more than one child. However, as Lorraine Grimes notes, there was evidence of a moral aversion, too, with the organisation not wishing to be seen to “encourage” this type of behaviour.⁷¹ In 1975 Cherish provided flats to unmarried mothers in Dublin, stressing: “It will be absolutely forbidden for a male friend to stay overnight, should this happen the girl involved will be instantly put out.”⁷² This response also reflects the fact that the majority of women during this period became unmarried mothers as a result of unplanned pregnancies, in other words, it was still framed very much as an accident and not a life choice. Cherish seems to have been influenced by the increasing tendency to pathologise the sexual behaviour of certain cohorts, particularly unmarried mothers with more than one child. In 1975, it argued that the number of such cases was increasing because those working with these women failed to appreciate “an individual’s sexual pattern does not often change radically after the birth of a child”.⁷³ It is little wonder that Cherish and the women it supported had internalised this prejudice; it was pervasive. However, on a one-to-one basis there is evidence that Cherish provided caring and practical support to numerous unmarried women with more than one child. In 1973, Sarah wrote to Cherish “in a terrible state of mind”, seeking help with her second pregnancy: “I know if my brothers find out they will probably kick me out, I guess I would not blame them. Once is bad enough.”⁷⁴ The painful irony for Sarah was that she was indicative of both the transformation of Ireland’s sexual and familial landscape and of the unfair gendered implications of being at the forefront of that change.

Cherish and the changing Irish family

The Irish family was undergoing the most significant transformation since the Great Famine (1845–1851), and largely in relation to women’s role. More women were marrying, but upon marriage they were having less children: between 1961 and 1981, the marital fertility rate declined by 38 percent.⁷⁵ However, perhaps the most significant change was the number of women becoming heads of household through desertion, separation and (after 1997) divorce, and unmarried motherhood. It was the last category that was growing fastest and having the greatest impact. In the first decade of Cherish’s existence the number of unmarried mothers receiving the statutory allowance increased exponentially: in 1976,

3,334 women claimed the allowance, by 1985 this figure had increased to 11,530 and by 1989, 16,564.⁷⁶ Single, unmarried mothers were the most rapidly expanding segment of the lone parent population, increasing over 135 percent between 1981 and 1986.⁷⁷ This rise coincided with the sharp decline in adoption rates: in 1971 adoptions as a proportion of nonmarital births were over 70 percent, by 1990 this had plummeted to 8 percent.⁷⁸ These statistics point to a fundamental shift in both sexual behaviour and sociocultural understandings of the family. Cherish’s development mapped and fed into this shifting landscape and the thousands of letters it received from unmarried mothers from all over Ireland record the human complexity of that process.⁷⁹

From the day in March 1973 when the founding members of Cherish published their “call” to unmarried mothers in the Irish newspapers, women began writing to and calling the organisation. While their spoken words have largely evaporated into history,⁸⁰ their written words, immortalised in the letters Cherish received over the next three decades, represent a female archive of pain, love and resilience. They document the visceral fear of discovering you are pregnant in a small Irish town, the strain of keeping a pregnancy secret, the pain of telling elderly parents something you believe will shame them, the love felt for the brave parents who met fear with loyalty and, as the years wore on, a growing sense of the possible, a stronger determination to make a decision based on your own needs rather than the prejudice of others. Many letters record the overwhelming feelings of love for the children born of hidden pregnancies, while others document the wrench of adoption. They represent the lived experience of the sexual double standard, gender inequality, stigma, shame and the resultant poverty many women endured. These letters are the texture of social change in all its humanity, anguish, confusion and hope. They are also a tangible reminder of the very female nature of the sociocultural change Ireland experienced between the 1970s and 1990s.

In 1979 Mairead wrote to Cherish from the largest mother and baby home, St Patrick’s Home, on the outskirts of Dublin, to tell someone about her joy upon the birth of her daughter: “I am delighted that it’s all over but I wish I could keep it. I think that she is really beautiful.”⁸¹ A simple wish to keep your baby felt, and was, still countercultural in 1970s Ireland. Even with an unmarried mothers’ allowance and the support of Cherish, for many women keeping their baby remained a social and economic impossibility. In 1982, Amy wrote a few days after the birth of her child: “I had a little boy & when I had to hand him over to the nun ... I nearly collapsed.”⁸² Although she had a good friend with her, who tried to steady her with a “good strong drink”, she remained distraught: “Never before have I gone to pieces like I did Monday ... My mind is still in a turmoil, looking for a way out, I’d love to keep the baby, but how could I. I could not bring him home. My father still never found out T. G. [Thank God].”⁸³ Amy offers just one example of the complex social, gender, emotional and familial factors that went into the decision to keep and raise a baby born outside marriage. It should not be forgotten that there were real and powerful forces vested in preventing these families becoming legitimate social structures. Cherish was one of the

few agencies geared to facilitate unmarried mothers and their children becoming families; almost all other groups concerned with unmarried mothers were structured around adoption.

While social hostility and stigma represented serious barriers for many women, it was financial security that represented the biggest practical impediment to keeping and raising a child alone. Morality and economics were intimately connected and worked to normalise and reinforce one another. Thus, unmarried mothers found it virtually impossible to afford a place to live for them and their child/ren. In August 1979, Angela, writing from rural Ireland, summed up the stress of living in a cramped or hostile situation:

I am not one Bit happy at Home I don't get on well with them at all and they are always giving out about the ~~child~~ (c) child crying & How the neighbours will hear her ... would you be able to Try & get me a Flat ... a small bed room & small Kitchen & a Bath Room.⁸⁴

Many others wrote about feeling as though they were literally locked inside by the shame. Martha, writing from the northwest of Ireland, was by no means on her own when she explained:

I am 5 months Pregnant, and at the Moment I am feeling very desperate I am unemployed, and I stay in the House all the time, as the stigma of the Unmarried Mother is terrible around Here. I am an Asthmatic, and this staying in and the worry I am going through is not Helping my complaint. Could you Please arrange for me to stay away from Home, as I am very lonely and alone.⁸⁵

For many of these women, Cherish represented not just a practical ally but also an emotional support. Many women continued writing after the birth of their children, some sending photos and Christmas updates, and others receiving emotional and material support for years.

By the 1980s there was a definite increase in letters from women determined to keep their children and seeking advice regarding benefits and rights. Sandra's letter from Bessborough, the mother and baby home in Cork, was increasingly common in tone and content:

Dear Cherish,
I write to ask if you would be able to help me in any way. I am a single mother to be – my baby being due in about four weeks – and I wish to keep and rear my own child. I am on my own without support from the child's father or my parents – they being elderly with a limited income.⁸⁶

Like many other correspondents, Sandra developed a relationship with Cherish over the course of her pregnancy. After her baby was born, she wrote to inform them: "I am hoping now to return to Dublin soon, keep my son, and also return to college. It all sounds

rather much at the moment but I’m working on them one by one.”⁸⁷ A vital aspect of Cherish’s work during these years was making women like Sandra feel she had a community of unmarried mothers at her back as she faced these goals “one by one”.

Sociologist Tom Inglis argues that: “The convention was that once [unmarried mothers] concealed themselves and their condition, they were allowed to live the lie of their condition.” He identifies the 1980s as a period when Irish women were increasingly unwilling to live this social lie.⁸⁸ Cherish was part of the landscape that made this shift viable for many women. The letters to the organisation reveal the profound personal challenges inherent in navigating a sexual landscape in renegotiation, where the consequences of transgression remained unevenly divided. The learning curve for the founders of Cherish was steep. Although the organisation was client-led, the range of issues women faced were incredibly diverse, complex and difficult, from sexual violence to complicated family and custody situations. O’Dea recalled: “Listening to the stories of survival, of managing on tiny amounts of money, finding all kinds of ways and means of hanging on to their children against all the odds, I came at last to a deep appreciation of the reality of the lives of women.”⁸⁹

By 1983, Cherish received 4,270 calls and/or letters and recorded that “the attitude of family members in the majority of recorded cases were supportive”.⁹⁰ It was realistic about these changes noting, for example, that the more supportive approach of many employers may well have been as a result of the introduction of maternity protection legislation in 1981, rather than any change of heart.⁹¹ Indeed, Cherish was keenly aware that the relationship between attitudes, behaviour and legislation was complex but real, hence its constant work to ensure the abolition of the legal status of illegitimacy, which was finally successful in 1987:

This year will go down in the annals of Cherish as a very historical year. The Status of Children Act, 1987, a landmark in legal reform, is the validation and realisation of much of what Cherish has striven for since its foundation in 1972. It is without doubt a positive step forward in the continued efforts of Cherish to establish social equality and social acceptability for the single parent family in Irish society.⁹²

While Cherish acknowledged the need for continued legislative reform, particularly in relation to housing and social welfare, the removal of the legal status of illegitimacy represented the elimination of the final legal basis for discrimination against those born outside marriage. Cherish understood language mattered, knowing the word “illegitimate” represented a world view that rationalised and perpetuated the prejudice unmarried mothers and their children faced. Thus, it worked painstakingly to reshape the lexicon and narrative in the public sphere about these families. It noticed, for example, “newspapers continuing to use the word “illegitimate” when referring to children born outside marriage” and wrote promptly to the relevant editors to explain the new law and the offence the word caused.⁹³ While Cherish could claim increasing success in the elimination of a moral

narrative about unmarried mothers, it was quick to note a counterargument sharpening its social teeth in various places. In 1988, it reported “some inaccurate and misleading reports concerning single mothers and the housing and social welfare system”, noting “we have written to put things straight”.⁹⁴ There are many ways to ostracise a group and the welfare trope was becoming a powerful charge against unmarried mothers as recession bit hard in the 1980s. This assertion was made by various public figures; for example, in 1986, in the Irish parliament, Alice Glenn, a conservative member of the main governing coalition party, claimed working-class girls were deliberately getting pregnant to avail of statutory benefits and give their lives meaning.⁹⁵ While in the same year, from the other side of the political spectrum, the republican socialist Tony Gregory, also a member of parliament, agreed that young women from disadvantaged areas might see parenthood as means to “independence, some money and a flat of their own”.⁹⁶

This was particularly confounding for Cherish, which knew, and bore witness to, the feminisation of poverty, as single women throughout the country struggled to live on paltry welfare entitlements, unable to afford rent or childcare. In its corrective of this disingenuous narrative, Cherish stressed that “the single parent on social welfare is being gradually ground down by poverty and the persistent fight to make ends meet. This leads to a slow and growing depression and sometimes to a dreadful sense of isolation on the part of the mother and child.”⁹⁷ More importantly, it insisted the state was no innocent bystander, but rather that it had the statutory responsibility to ensure “those living on Social Welfare should not be put in the position whereby they have to depend on practical handouts, and suffer the indignity of having to seek such help”.⁹⁸ Fundamentally, it offered a critique of the mixed economy of welfare in which single parents exhausted themselves seeking insufficient help from various sources in order to survive as a family. There was shame to own, but it was not single parents’; it was the state, the republic in which “the concept of ‘deserving poor’ is very much still with us”.⁹⁹ As the recession of the 1980s deepened, Cherish continued to pressurise the government to fulfil its commitment to vulnerable families. In 1987, it highlighted how, despite the recommendations of the report of the *Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents* four years previously,¹⁰⁰ there was “still no properly organised system of day care for the children of working parents”. This meant that “the cost of day care is often so high that it’s hardly worth while working. The alternative is trying to live on the Unmarried Mother’s Allowance ... So a great many single mothers find themselves in the poverty trap.”¹⁰¹ The message was twofold: preventing single parents working was a false economy *and* this structural discrimination was particularly gendered. Single mothers massively outnumbered single fathers, and men’s pay and job opportunities significantly outweighed women’s, therefore, the lack of childcare compounded the existing inequalities. The feminisation of poverty was not accidental; it was policy.

Conclusion

When Cherish entered the mixed economy of welfare for unmarried mothers in the early 1970s, the Roman Catholic Church was by far the biggest and most powerful player in the field. It controlled or ran most of the institutional facilities that catered for unmarried mothers and, crucially, the adoption services which facilitated the highest rate of adoption in Europe. Cherish's very existence, not to mention its aims, represented a fundamental challenge to the status quo, principally because its *raison d'être* was to redefine understandings of the unmarried mother and her child, from a moral problem to be solved, into a legitimate family with a right to support. In 1984, the Catholic bishop of Kerry, Kevin McNamara, made it clear that this way of thinking undermined the status of the family in Ireland. He argued that while the needs of unmarried mothers "can and should be met on the basis of individual rights without resorting to the radical solution, the implications of which would be enormous, of substituting a completely new understanding of what constitutes a family".¹⁰² It was exactly this "new understanding" Cherish worked to foster. The various mother and baby homes gradually began to close throughout the 1970s, but it was 1996 before the last one closed its doors. Adoption agencies continued to operate, but were increasingly dealing with people seeking to trace relatives than to have them adopted.

Cherish was undoubtedly a key agent in reshaping both the sociocultural understanding of unmarried motherhood in Ireland, and the reality of that experience for countless women who came within its orbit. Through thousands of letters, phone calls and meetings, the people of Cherish shared their experience, offered guidance and advice, and pushed back against the stigma, fear and shame that so many experienced. By the end of the 1980s, Cherish formed part of a growing lobby for a "coherent family policy" that was government-led and that defined the family as "either a two-parent or one-parent family, not necessarily founded on marriage".¹⁰³ In this it has been largely successful, however, now called One Family Ireland, it continues to advocate for single parents, for whom the biggest problems remain income inequality and housing.

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¹ For an analysis of these changes, see Carole Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth in the Sixties* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), and Mary E. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957–1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² See "Women's Liberation," *Irish Times*, 9 March 1971; John Horgan, "Women's LIB 'Only Radical Force': Irish politics 'stagnant'," *Irish Times*, 15 April 1971.

³ Robinson became the first female president of Ireland in 1991, serving until 1997 when she became United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002). She continues to play a leading role in the field of international human and environmental law and rights.

- ⁴ Nell McCafferty, *Nell* (Penguin: Dublin, 2004), 217. See *Irishwomen: Chains and Change. The Civil Wrongs of Irishwomen* (Dublin: Irish Women's Liberation Movement, 1971).
- ⁵ Brendan M. Walsh, "Aspects of Labour Supply and Demand with Special Reference to the Employment of Women in Ireland," *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* 22, no. 3 (1971): 88–123, <http://hdl.handle.net/2262/7283>.
- ⁶ Foley notes marriage bars in the private sector were not illegal until the antidiscrimination legislation in 1977. Deirdre Foley, "'Their proper place': Women, Work and the Marriage Bar in Independent Ireland, c. 1924–1973," *Social History* 47, no. 1 (2022): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2009692>.
- ⁷ Article 41.2.2., *Constitution of Ireland* (1937). <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html>.
- ⁸ The 1974 Social Welfare Act made the mother of the child the default recipient of the allowance rather than the father.
- ⁹ The number of female-headed households doubled between 1981 and 2006, accounting for 15 percent of all families. Aidan Punch, "Marriage, Fertility and the Family in Ireland: A Statistical Perspective," *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* 36 (2006/2007): 207, <http://hdl.handle.net/2262/23560>.
- ¹⁰ "Women's Lib to hold first public meeting," *Irish Times*, 14 April 1971.
- ¹¹ June Levine, *Sisters: The Personal Story of an Irish Feminist* (1982; Dublin: Attic Press, 2009), 137.
- ¹² Jasper notes that feminist activists of the 1970s and 1980s "battled against the norms by which women were not supposed to express anger, realizing that anger is essential to demanding rights and fighting in political arenas". James M. Jasper, "Constructing Indignation: Anger Dynamics in Protest Movements," *Emotion Review* 6, no. 3 (2014): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914522863>.
- ¹³ For accounts, see Levine, *Sisters*, 136–38; McCafferty, *Nell*, 200–57.
- ¹⁴ Levine, *Sisters*, 137.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ McCafferty, *Nell*, 220–21.
- ¹⁷ Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey, 1920–2018* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).
- ¹⁸ Connolly argues these tensions were accentuated by other issues including the housing situation, Northern Ireland question, lesbian feminism and internal hierarchies. See Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 121.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ²⁰ A recent addition is Lorraine Grimes, "'We did what needed to be done': Cherish, the First Support Group for Unmarried Mothers in Ireland," *Women's History Review* 32, no. 1 (2023): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2088087>.
- ²¹ This assumption appears to have governed the recommendation of the 2021 Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes that women who entered mother and baby homes after 1973 "do not have a case for financial redress". See "Recommendations," *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* (12 January 2021), para. 27, 7.
- ²² Connolly and Grimes being notable exceptions, both referenced above.

“I felt I should be there, all these people talking on my behalf without consulting me”

²³ The term used to describe the organisation in Cherish, *Chairman's Report, July 1979–June 1980*, 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Carole Holohan, “The Second Vatican Council, Poverty and Irish Mentalities,” *History of European Ideas* 46, no. 7 (2020): 1009–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1747225>.

²⁶ After 1922, there were ten laundries in the Republic run by four Catholic orders; only one Magdalene asylum (in Dublin) was in Protestant hands.

²⁷ For example, the Bethany Mother and Baby Home in Dublin was associated with various Protestant churches. It closed in 1971.

²⁸ See table compiled in Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin, 1922–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 174.

²⁹ *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1928–9*, 113.

³⁰ *Annual Report of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1930–1*, 129.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The length of stay was largely at the discretion of the mother superior.

³³ The Legion of Mary's Regina Coeli hostel (1930) was an exception; it aimed to keep mother and baby together.

³⁴ Conor O'Mahony, “Proposal for a State Response to Illegal Birth Registration” (30 September 2021), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6ff84-proposals-for-a-state-response-to-illegal-birth-registrations-in-ireland/>.

³⁵ Dermot Walsh, ed., *The Unmarried Mother in the Irish Community: A Report on the National Conference on Community Services for the Unmarried Parent* (Kilkenny: Kilkenny Social Services, 1972), 13–14.

³⁶ There was widespread knowledge that Irish unmarried mothers had been migrating to Britain for decades to escape the punitive system in Ireland and ensure anonymity. Lindsey Earner-Byrne, “The Boat to England: An Analysis of the Official Reactions to the Emigration of Single Expectant Irishwomen to Britain, 1922–1972,” *Irish Economic and Social History* 30 (2003): 52–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/033248930303000103>; Jennifer Redmond, *Moving Histories: Irish Women's Emigration to Britain from Independence to Republic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

³⁷ Mary Maher, “What's happening about unmarried mothers?,” *Irish Times*, 28 November 1972.

³⁸ Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, “Social and Cultural Factors in Family Planning,” in *The Changing Family* (Dublin: Family Studies Unit, UCD, 1984), 76.

³⁹ “ALLY: a friend for Ireland's unwed mothers,” *Irish Times*, 28 September 1971.

⁴⁰ For the conference proceedings, see Walsh, *Unmarried Mother in the Irish Community*.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Maher, “What's happening about unmarried mothers?”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

- ⁴⁶ These were Colette O'Neill, Annette and Margaret Murphy, Jane [Grey?], Mary Callan and Irene Blanchfield.
- ⁴⁷ Maura Richards, *Single Issue* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1998), 13. Richards is Maura O'Dea's married name.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ⁴⁹ *Irishwomen: Chains or Change*, 22.
- ⁵⁰ Letters to the Editor, "Calling Unmarried Mothers," *Irish Independent*, 6 March 1973, and *Evening Herald*, 13 March 1973.
- ⁵¹ Richards, *Single Issue*, 69. This foundation story is remarkably similar to that of Gingerbread UK, which was started in 1970 when single mother Tessa Fothergill decided to establish a support group in London. The *Sunday Times* wrote about her story and, as a result, hundreds of other single parents contacted her. See <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/about-us/gingerbread-history/>.
- ⁵² Richards, *Single Issue*, 68.
- ⁵³ This reference to "cherishing all the children of the nation equally", in fact, referred to Ulster and the divisions between nationalists and unionists.
- ⁵⁴ Richards, *Single Issue*, 70.
- ⁵⁵ The allowances came into effect on 5 July 1973.
- ⁵⁶ Cherish, *Annual Report*, 1973. See <https://onefamily.ie/cherish-was-founded-in-1972/>.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ Cherish, *Chairman's Report*, July 1979–June 1980, 6.
- ⁵⁹ The Protestant Aid Society was founded in Dublin in 1800s to help the Protestant poor.
- ⁶⁰ The Rotunda Girls Aid Society, associated with the Dublin Protestant maternity hospital, the Rotunda, assisted poor Protestant girls, unmarried mothers, and organised Protestant adoptions.
- ⁶¹ St Patrick's Guild was a Catholic adoption society run by the Sisters of Charity since the 1940s.
- ⁶² Under the 1931 Affiliation Orders Act women could sue a putative father for maintenance; however, this had to be done within six months of the birth. Cherish advocated for this period to be extended.
- ⁶³ Cherish, *Social Workers Report*, 1977, 2.
- ⁶⁴ Kelly noted the chilling effect of this increasingly repressive legal situation on those advising young people on sexual health and abortion. Laura Kelly, "'Please help me, I am so miserable!': Sexual Health, Emotions and Counselling in Teen and Young Adult Problem Pages in late 1980s Ireland," *Medical Humanities* 49, no. 2 (2023): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2021-012350>.
- ⁶⁵ Cherish, *Chairperson's Report*, AGM, 9 April 1987, 3.
- ⁶⁶ Cherish, *Chairperson's Report: September 1983–August 1984*, 3.
- ⁶⁷ Richards, *Single Issue*, 130.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

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- ⁶⁹ Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement*, 160, emphasis in original. Laura Kelly, "Irishwomen United: The Contraception Action Programme and the Feminist Campaign for Free, Safe and Legal Contraception in Ireland, c.1975–81," *Irish Historical Studies* 43, no. 164 (2019): 269–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ihis.2019.54>.
- ⁷⁰ Richards, *Single Issue*, 131.
- ⁷¹ Grimes notes there was "judgment" in relation to this cohort. Grimes, "We did what needed to be done," 30.
- ⁷² Cherish, *Committee Minutes*, 30 April 1975, 1.
- ⁷³ Cherish, *Social Workers Report, 1975*, 2.
- ⁷⁴ Sarah, Waterford, 7 October 1973. Cherish Archive.
- ⁷⁵ Brendan M. Walsh, "Marriage in Ireland in the Twentieth Century," in *Marriage in Ireland*, ed. Art Cosgrove (Dublin: College Press, 1985), 140. See also Mary E. Daly, "Marriage, Fertility and Women's Lives in Twentieth-century Ireland," *Women's History Review* 15 (2006): 582, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020500530638>.
- ⁷⁶ Valerie Richardson, "The Family Life Styles of Some Single Parents in Ireland," in *In and Out of Marriage: Irish and European Experiences*, ed. Gabriel Kiely (Dublin: Family Studies Centre, UCD, 1992), 70–86.
- ⁷⁷ Anthony McCashin, *Lone Parents in the Republic of Ireland: Enumeration, Description and Implications for Social Security* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 1993), 1.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁷⁹ All letters to Cherish from unmarried mothers are cited with permission of One Family Ireland on the basis that all names have been totally changed and specific address identifiers removed. The collection has recently been transferred to the National Library of Ireland, but permission to consult and site the archive is required and not all of the collection is open for consultation.
- ⁸⁰ Some of these conversations are recorded in social worker notes.
- ⁸¹ Mairead, St Patrick's Home, Navan Rd, Dublin. n.d., c. 1979. Cherish Archive. The home was owned by the local authority but run by the Catholic Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul.
- ⁸² Amy, Limerick, 29 July [1982]. Cherish Archive.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ Angela, Clare, 20 Aug 1979. Cherish Archive.
- ⁸⁵ Martha, Sligo, 8 September 1980. Cherish Archive.
- ⁸⁶ Sandra, Sacred Heart Bessborough, Cork, c. August 1980. Social Work File 1980s. Cherish Archive.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ Tom Inglis, *Truth, Power and Lies: Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2003), 169.
- ⁸⁹ Richards, *Single Issue*, 76.
- ⁹⁰ Cherish, *Work Report, Sept 83 to Aug 84*, 3.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁹² Cherish, *Work Report: 1987–Sept 1988*, 4.

⁹³ Cherish, *Chairperson's Report, AGM, 14 Sept 1988*, 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Alice Glenn, "Combat Poverty Agency Bill, 1985 [Seanad]: Second Stage," *Dáil Éireann Debates*, vol. 364, no. 1 (25 February 1986), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1986-02-25/speech/159/>.

⁹⁶ *Sunday Tribune*, 2 March 1986, cited in Kathleen O'Higgins and Maura Doyle, *State Care – Some Children's Alternative: An Analysis of the Data from the Returns to the Department of Health, Child Care Division, 1982* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 1988), 117.

⁹⁷ Cherish, *Social Work Report, January to December 1980*, 1.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ *Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents: Report to the Minister for Labour: March 1983* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1983).

¹⁰¹ Cherish, *Chairperson's Report, AGM, 9 April 1987*, 1.

¹⁰² Kevin McNamara, *The Family Today* (Dublin: Irish Messenger, 1984), 7.

¹⁰³ O'Higgins and Doyle, *State Care*, 119.