Keeping up Appearances: The Containment of Irish Women in the Scramble for a Post-Independence National Identity

Doireann O'Brein

The surge in the institutionalisation of Irish women in Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries following the achievement of Independence should not be viewed simply as a case of unchecked Catholic influence over governance. Nor should it be conceptualised as thoughtless deferral of power from the State to the Church. Instead, this mass incarceration should be seen as a conscious and intentional choice made by the free-state political elite who sought to cling to a conservative national identity in order to retrospectively legitimize the fight for independence. A clear story emerges, evidenced by the mass-repatriation of fleeing pregnant Irish women to Britain and the censorship of publications uncovering female 'sexual deviance', in which political objectives derived from post-colonial instability were favoured over the personhood and autonomy of Irish women.

In this essay, I search for an explanation for the suffering experienced by Irish women institutionalised at the hands of the state due to the deferral of power by post-independence policy makers to the Irish Catholic Church. I argue that the rejection of reproductive freedom was bolstered by a disregard for women amidst a desperation by the post-independence elite to establish a national identity on the international stage. Upon achieving legislative independence in 1922, the Catholic Church began immediately to work alongside the government of the Free State in the earliest stages of Irish welfare state development. In this essay I will be focusing on the ways in which the Church helped to shape those policies that targeted

single mothers and pregnant women through their institutionalisation in Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. A clear yet complex story emerges, one in which the dignity and personhood of vulnerable Irish women was overlooked in favour of political motives to establish a conservative and morally upright identity of the fledging Free-State.

The Catholic Church in Ireland has internally generated stances on social policy that were characterized by the fundamental centrality of the family unit and support for social policies of subsidiarity and non-interventionism of the State into the private sphere. Kelly outlines the early position taken by the Church before the conception of the Irish Free State, stating that Catholic Social Teaching in the early 1920s was modelled from, the papal encyclical published in 1891 entitled the 'Rerum Novarum' (Kelly, 1999). The Novarum highlighted the value of Christian charity as an indispensable tenet of social society and thus directly opposed the interventionist philosophy of the welfare state (Kelly, 1999). It prescribed that government intervention into the private sphere, into the intimate world of the family, could be tolerated only in the case of 'extreme necessity' (Kelly, 1999). It advocated for vocationalism, which was a state recognition of the role of charity and the implications of that for the creation social policy. The encyclical concluded with the explicit wording that to be a supporter of socialist policy and to be a good Catholic were mutually exclusive concepts (Kelly, 1999). Beyond this broad rejection of the liberal democratic welfare state however, the more specific and technical stance of the Church is difficult to define. Fahey argues in 'The Catholic Church and Social Policy' that 'Catholic social thought held aloof from technical analyses of existing social systems' (Fahey, 1998). The stance of the Church when it came to social policy was grounded more in morality than concrete social planning and thus when it came to specific policy proposals they tended to take a more pragmatic approach, due to the absence of a core intellectual or theoretical base guiding their policy analysis (Fahey, 1998).

The initial decade following independence witnessed retrenchment in welfare provision in Ireland and this can be explained by the instability caused by independence paired the with the opposition levelled against redistributive policy by the Church (Fahey, 1998). The defining dynamic of post-colonial Irish policy formation was the interaction of two directly opposing ideologies of , arguably two equally powerful institutions: the church with its anti-welfare state, anti-interventionist stance and the state which leaned more towards welfare policy expansion (Kelly, 1999). This dynamic between Church and State can be seen clearly in the period following the publication of Sir William Beveridge's Social Insurance and

Allied Services in December 1942 which aimed at the 'abolition of want through the provision of income security, mainly through compulsory social insurance' (Kelly, 1999, 111). In response, the government put forward a White Paper containing proposals to replicate the corporatist policies to which key representatives of the Catholic Church, Peter McKevitt and Cornelius Lucey as well as eminent members of the Catholic clergy, reacted with a hesitant and cautious welcome. Their acceptance was arguably due to the Beveridge Report being just moderate enough, not to represent socialism nor totalitarianism paired with its emphasis on worker security (Kelly, 1999). However as soon as these corporatist policies were implemented, it became clear that the previous acceptance was purely an exercise in intellect. The introduction of Children's Allowances in 1944, the establishment of separate departments of Health and Social Welfare in 1947 and the passing of the Social Welfare Acts of 1948 and 1952 was met with sharp opposition from the Church. It held that 'the state should not do for people what they can do for themselves by private organisations' (Kelly, 1999, 114) and that the absence of a need for charity would lead to the weakening of the citizenry's moral fibre. While it is impossible to know what tangible impact the opposing stance of the Catholic Church on the move towards a welfare state in Ireland it is clear that the Church held a position of power that is arguably more than what fits the 'Church-as-just-another-interest group model' (Keogh, 1994, 51). Armed with this appreciation of the distinct position of unrivalled power of the Church in shaping social and welfare policy in Ireland, I now move on, to explore its impact on those policies that specifically targeted women, focusing on state treatment of unmarried pregnant women and mothers in Ireland, with the installation of Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalen asylums.

The concrete development of the policy began even before Independence was secured, with the former chairman of the Galway County Council, and active Catholic layman, Sir Joseph Glynn publishing a policy recommendation in The Irish Ecclesiastical Record in 1921. His central idea was that the 'problem of the unmarried mother' was to be combatted with the implementation of a combined hostel and factory in which women would reside in order to escape the inevitable shame of their condition while working to earn their keep (Garrett, 2016, 712). A Catholic clergyman, Reverend M. H. MacInerny echoed this recommendation, and was supportive of the network of 'Rescue Homes' in England established by the religious sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Garrentt, 2016). Further, MacInerny signalled concern for the numerous women who fled to England to avail of assistance, often given only on the condition

that they convert to Protestantism (Garrett, 2016; Smith, 2007). It is clear therefore, that even at the idea's conception before Ireland gained executive autonomy, that policy development in this area was almost destined to be bound up with anti-protestant sentiment. Following Irish Independence in 1922 the Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act 1923 stated that each county will contain a workhouse building in which non-medical inmates would be housed and by 1926 this is where over a thousand unmarried pregnant women and mothers were institutionalized (Garrett, 2016). Policy began to change in 1927, with the publication of the report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor. The commission's report almost perfectly replicated the scheme put forward by the Church and called for a two-tiered approach to the problem of unmarried mothers, distinguishing different treatments for 'first offenders' who were thought to have potential for reform and 'repeat offenders' who were labelled as 'less hopeful cases' (Smith, 2007, 56). The report suggested that the institutions should have some degree of control over the length of time the women were detained and that each institution would be overseen by a county council but run day to day by female Catholic religious groups, publicly funded with state grants. As set down by the Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934, each 'first offender' would be admitted to a Mother and Baby Home and would be forced to contribute towards their confinement by way of domestic labour (Smith, 2007). The second type of woman, the less hopeful case, was however relegated to one of the completely church-controlled Magdalene Asylums in which they would be provided with 'special provision'. The report offered no further detail on these institutions or the nature of this 'special provision', exemplifying the culture in Ireland of almost unthinking deference to the Catholic Church which at the time viewed the asylum's religious character as synonymous with unquestionable assurance of the welfare of the penitents (Smith, 2007).

The principal line of argument of this paper is that the way in which the Catholic Church affected Irish social policy was to bring about the containment of women who were sexually deviant mentioned above, and that this can be explained by the perceived desperate need for an Irish national identity in the aftermath of achieving independence from British rule. I now focus on analysing why the state's social policy responded to unmarried mothers in the oppressive and paternalistic way that it did, I argue that a piece of the puzzle that often goes overshadowed by the focus on religious doctrine, especially when it comes to explaining why this repression emerged in the form of social policy is the postcolonial political context in which it was developed. As Michael Garrett argues in

'Unmarried Mothers in the Republic of Ireland', fixed constructs of gender, enshrined by the Church, played a key role in the building of the new Irish State (Garrett, 2016). Despite the declaration of equal rights in both the 1916 proclamation and the 1922 Free State Constitution, women in Ireland suffered a gradual erosion of their political rights after 1922. The Free State and later the Republic, as imposed by both the ecclesiastical and political hierarchy, was divided sharply into public and private spheres with women contained in the latter, their work appropriated by a paternalistic system and a set of male-focused social policies of the time (Garrett, 2016). Moreover, 'The fledging Irish nation's desire to define its citizens would soon begin to shape what the ideal Irish woman should look like' (Costello Wecker, 2015, 265) and the centrality of the Catholic Church in this process would play a huge role. The religious construction of the idealized Irish woman as a conservative, domestic, traditional mother became a central part of the national identity. This was not simply a vague widespread belief, but was concretely enshrined in article 41 of the 1937 constitution.

> *'The State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.' (Quoted in Randall, 1987, 197/8)*

The politicization of the behaviour of Irish women led to heightened political importance of their sexuality (Luddy, 2007). Throughout the 19th century there was a widespread belief among Irish nationalists that widespread morality, particularly sexual morality, of the Irish people was corrupted by the presence of the British garrison (Luddy, 2007). However, even after the establishment of the Free State, sexual deviance from the above mentioned female archetype did not decrease, exposing the fact that the real threat to the identity of Ireland as a traditionally morally righteous, Catholic country was not to be found in British interference but in Irish women themselves.

> *'…sexual behaviour and its regulation became a national obsession in the post-independence era in an effort to prove decency, respectability and capability in governing Ireland as an independent nation.' (Grimes, 2016, 52)*

The fact that the survival of the Ireland envisioned by those who fought for independence was believed to be anchored in the maintenance of

idealised womanhood, it is no surprise that the Church and State responded with drastic social policy measures to combat these deviations, attempting to 'return the nation to purity' (Luddy, 2007, 80). The unmarried mother was possibly the strongest symbol of moral deviance, and thus national identity breakdown, in the eyes of the Church and State. It was both a consequence and a symptom of sexual deviance, associated with the prevalence of perceived overly progressive, commercialised dancehalls and the liberalism of the Irish youth. It was also taken as given that unwed mothers were likely to participate in prostitution further down the line (Luddy, 2007). Because of this, women who were incarcerated nominally with a view to punishment or in other cases reformation and re-education, was, in reality, was the result of escalating panic among political elites unable to establish the image of a morally stringent and successfully regimented state on an international level that had been envisioned.

I now substantiate my case that Ireland's colonial past played the decisive role in the Church's influence over this policy area. I do this by firstly examining the mass repatriation of Irish women who travelled to Britain in order to deal with an illegitimate pregnancy by way of their rescue homes and legalisation of adoption; and secondly the State's role in censorship of publications that would enlighten Europe about the sexual deviance of women, contrary to its stereotypical reputation as a Catholic, morally righteous state. The compilation of Irish social policy from the early 1920s onwards left women in an impossibly oppressive position legally, as outlined by Grimes in her 2016 publication.

'Ireland during the period of 1926 to 1957 remained a country where contraceptives were illegal, adoption was illegal, abortion was illegal, there was no financial assistance for unmarried mothers, institutionalisation was the only form of social care, and guilt and shame were associated with sex outside marriage.' (Grimes, 2016, 51).

Many pregnant Irish women fled Ireland because 'they felt that their secret was safer amidst the crowds of an English city' (Garrett, 2016). Furthermore, in Britain they could escape incarceration and access legal adoption, which was not made legal in Ireland until 26 years after England, which had first formally regulated and legalised adoption in 1926. The Child Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland, otherwise known as the CPRSI, was the main body engaged in the repatriation of these women and was symptomatic of the endemic 'moral panic' consuming the Irish people, in response to mass female migration to England. It was speculated that these women were reneging their faith in the process of accessing assistance overseas and that these Irish children would surely be raised

Protestant, which was unacceptable to both the Church and the State, leading to their systematic repatriation (Garrett, 2016). Further, 'port work' became common, which entailed welfare workers of the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau boarding ships set for Liverpool and Holyhead, with the objective of identifying any migrant expectant mothers on board in order to deter them from their journeys (Garrett, 2016). The state set out explicit policy with the Emergency Powers act 1939, which placed travel restrictions on Irish women (Smith, 2007). The forced return or stay of Irish pregnant women and their forced placement in Mother and Baby Homes or Magdalen laundries is extremely compelling evidence that female obedience and conservativism was a policy bound up in hostile post-colonial relations and the Irish desperation to establish well-ordered, morally righteous Catholicism as its national identity on the international stage. The institutionalisation and politicisation of Irish women should not be viewed purely as an outcome of hegemonic Catholic conservatism tormenting the nation, as public opinion and mass media may propose. Instead, I argue that this policy area needs to be explained in a way that is nuanced – independent Ireland's treatment of women was shaped hugely by its attempt to establish a post-colonial national identity of which the sexual conservativism of women played was indispensable.

Further support for this characterisation is found in how, in the 1920s, the State publicly reacted to the incidence of 'venereal diseases' (Luddy, 2006). Venereal diseases were thought by the Irish religious and political hierarchies to be externally introduced by the presence of the British garrison, in particular the Black and Tans, which was held to be a contaminant to the purer, Catholic Irish citizenry. When the British presence departed from Ireland following independence the immorality associated by nationalist propagandists with their influence was expected to leave alongside them but the instances of sexually transmitted disease, alongside general sexual deviance, persisted nonetheless (Luddy, 2006). How could the Free State acknowledge the persistence in Irish sexual deviance, evidenced by the prevalence of 'venereal disease' without admitting to a blatant failure in nation-building of a country that adhered to the Catholic faith? The Inter-Departmental Committee of Inquiry regarding Venereal Disease was established in 1924 to formulate a plan to quash this intolerable immorality and to diminish the evidence by reducing cases of venereal disease. Its report, along with many other similar reports such as the Juvenile Prostitution report of 1931 and Carrigan Committee report, provided convincing empirical evidence for the widespread sexual deviance of Irish women across social classes and geographic regions. The idealistic form of

womanhood that had come to be a defining feature of the Irish National identity as a morally and religiously superior state, both internally and on the international stage, had been exposed as a myth (Luddy, 2006). None of these reports were published. Moreover, in response to the Carrigan Committee report specifically, The Department of Justice opposed its publication on the grounds that it was 'clearly undesirable that such a view of conditions in the [Irish Free State] should be given wide circulation' (Luddy, 2006, 88). This provides an important instance of the State actively drawing a connection between its desire to find and maintain a certain national identity and to avoid the international perception of Ireland as a failing state, with the policing and incarceration of women through social policy related to Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalen Laundries.

While nominal secularism is growing in Ireland the fight for rudimental political freedoms, particularly reproductive freedoms, is far from over. The mass migration of Irish women to England in the early 20th century is all too eerily reminiscent of those journeys that women continue to be forced to take in their shadows today. The development of social policy implementing the institutionalisation of women in the newly independent state of Ireland should not be viewed as a simple case of extreme Catholic influence over governance. Instead, I have shown that these policies are a result of numerous complex and interlinking factors, such as the perceived importance for the Free State to cling to a patriarchal national identity to retrospectively legitimize the fight for independence, the symbolic importance of sexually conservative Irish women. Moreover it was bound up in anti-British sentinet and the desire of the Irish political hierarchy to prevent the portrayal of Ireland as devolving into a failing or immoral state post decolonization. The hunger to understand why the lives of Irish women were used as disposable instruments of political interests is ever present. With in-depth analysis, we may understand the roots of these atrocities more accurately and we become more equipped to tackle ongoing atrocities today.

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