

**SUBMISSION TO JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE FOR BIRTH INFORMATION AND TRACING
BILL (23.6.2021)**

(W.E.Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk 1903). 'Being gifted with a second sight of seeing yourself through the eyes of others' It is a peculiar sensation' he writes, 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'.

1 Brief Introduction

I am a member of the Collaborative Forum set up by the then Minister Katherine Zappone. I was an active member of the Language Meaning and Terminology section of The Report compiled by the Collaborative Forum in December 2018. This Report has not yet been published.

I am a survivor of numerous Irish Institutions throughout Ireland such as Mother and Baby Institutions and Industrial Schools.

I am a Mother whose infant son was removed from me without my consent in 1973 – I was 17 years old.

I am an expert by experience.

2 Factual Evidence

I agree that adopted persons should have a right to their pre adoption file. My disagreement is in two areas:

- a) Medical Information of parents at the disposal of the State and,
- b) Language of the proposed Bill.

a) **Medical Information**

The new Bill is so heavily weighted against the rights of the parent that I cannot see the balance between privacy of the parent and right to identity of the adopted person. I am troubled to learn that under this new Bill, parents of children to be adopted will be required to disclose their medical information. I see major problems with this aspect of the Bill because it is a gross invasion of the civil liberties of parents, in particular for Irish women.

Nobody else in Ireland is under a requirement to disclose their medical information to anybody other than their medical team.

- Will fathers be mandated to disclose their medical information?
- How would this disclosure be managed?
- Will it require primary legislation?
- Who will hold this information?
- Will there be a new body created to safeguard this information?
- Will the putative adoptive parents have access to the medical information of the parents?
- Will the parent whose medical information is being harvested have access?

And once again, this invasion of the parent's civil liberties is being enacted during what is probably the most vulnerable time in the parent's life. I ask the Committee to consider that Social Workers appointed to such 'cases', are never appointed to assist the parent, their sole brief is to protect the rights of the child and, as you may know, this can cause conflict between Agents of the State and parents.

b) Language of the Proposed Bill

I am dismayed to note the language of the proposed Bill. Language is a tool of the powerful. Have we not learned by now that language stigmatises, controls, breeds fear and contempt. History is a story about power, a story about those who won. Stigma is a key component of power and affects the way people see themselves and others – have we not have enough of the power to abuse directed at some of the most vulnerable in Irish society?

Many mothers formerly detained in the Mother and Child Institutions report how they feel that the criminalisation and classification of the unmarried mother influenced the legacy of language still in use today.

As a mother whose child was taken from me without my consent I know only too well the power of words.

New shorthand dismissive terms contained within this Bill such as '**Birth Mother' Birth Relative** are offensive to women, mothers in particular. This Bill seeks to enshrine in Law the language used to subjugate Irish women for 78 years of the existence of the Irish State.

As a scared 16-year old pregnant girl I well remember words such as 1st Offender, 2nd Offender, 3rd Offender and ' at Risk'; my placement in a Mother and Baby 'Home' versus County ' Home' entirely dependent on the charitable feelings of my jailor. We single parents being described in literature and policy papers as prolific mothers of degenerates, imbecility, venereal disease, insanity and blindness. This happened to thousands and thousands of Irish women and their children.

And now you wish to foster terms previously not enshrined in Irish law, terms adopted from a Canadian putative adoptive mother in the 60s with the set goal of distancing mothers from their children; reducing them to that of a biological incubator. I know of not one single mother who agrees with the term 'Birth Mother' and now this Bill seeks to widen this abuse by introducing new terms such as 'Birth Relative'? What on earth is a 'birth relative'? a 6th cousin, a grandchild?

Other mothers point out the subtle undermining of their role through contemporary language used by legislators, social workers, sociologists and adoptive – at no stage in the process does the mother have an equal footing with elites in determining her future and that of her baby.

There must surely be a mechanism for examining such language within an Irish context?

Recommendation

The Department of Equalities under the portfolio of Minister Roderic O'Gorman has recently established a steering group for a collaborative research project involving the Irish Research Council (IRC), and the Family Research Centre at NUI Galway and members of the Collaborative Forum examining Language, Terminology and Meaning. This project is ideally suited to examine the language of the proposed Bill on Information and Tracing.

I recommend that this Steering Group be given responsibility for examining the language of this bill and to make recommendations before it is passed into law.

The End