



Language, terminology and representation relating to Ireland's institutions historically known as `Mother and Baby Homes`, `County Homes' and related institutions: Summary report

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**Language,
Terminology and
Representation**
Summary Report

Relating to Ireland's
Institutions historically
known as '*Mother and Baby
Homes*', '*County Homes*'
and related Institutions

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MOTHER

~~HUMAN~~

~~ILLEGITIMATE~~

~~UNMARRIED~~

CITIZEN



OLLSCOIL NA
GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY
OF GALWAY

In partnership with



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

‘Changing how we use language and terminology and radically reviewing how past experiences have so often been misrepresented will not in itself achieve the justice so many people still need regarding their experiences in institutions run by state and church, together or in parallel. However, such change represents one of many steps needed to achieve historical justice’.

Why was this study done?

This study was a direct response to recommendations made in the first report of the Collaborative Forum of Former Residents of Mother and Baby Homes and Related Institutions (2018, published 2022) in relation to Language, Terminology and Representation. The purpose of this research study is to build on the work of the Collaborative Forum who have been influential in highlighting the need for special attention to use/misuse of language, terminology and misrepresentation.– See report available here: [gov.ie – Mother and Baby Home Collaborative Forum \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie – Mother and Baby Home Collaborative Forum (www.gov.ie))

This study is part of the government’s response to the Final Report of the Mother and Baby Homes, Commission of Investigation though it was commissioned before the publication of the report. This report also forms part of the DCEDIY (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth) actions in response to the publication of the Collaborative Forum Report in November, 2022. See background statement here: [gov.ie – Mother and Baby Home Collaborative Forum \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie – Mother and Baby Home Collaborative Forum (www.gov.ie))

Who funded it?

The project was commissioned through the COALESCE Irish Research Council Funding scheme and jointly funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), then the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

What were the questions for the research?

This project addressed five research questions.

1. How can we learn about language and terminology from those who had lived experience of institutions including Mother and Baby Homes and County Homes?
2. What can be we learn from other countries?
3. What can be learnt from the Mother and Baby Home Commission Report and related reports about use of language?
4. What guidance can we develop based on the learning from the project?
5. What can be done next to build on learning from the project?

How was the project done?

- We read relevant literature from many countries who have had similar experiences.
- We analysed the use of language in the Mother and Baby Home Commission Report and some other related documents.
- We held consultations with 43 people: 26 individual meetings, 1 group meeting with 8 people and 9 individuals wrote to us.
- The most important source of information to inform the messages from this research came from the consultations.

Why did people participate?

The main reason people spoke to us with us was to help understanding and improve the use of language and terminology.

How did the project minimise harm to those involved in it?

- Doing our best to avoid harm, but we couldn't avoid the fact that talking about past experiences could be upsetting and cause further upset or harm.
- Ensuring confidentiality of people's stories by not sharing any identifying information or personal details.
- Taking care of and protecting any personal information that was collected
- Minimising distress caused by not asking about anything that people did not wish to discuss.
- Providing appropriate support where distress may have been caused such as offer of counselling (though noting it was not specialist trauma counselling which, in hindsight, should have been put in place).

What are the limits of this research?

- We were not able to have larger public consultations because of Covid-19 restrictions. Our sample is relatively small (43) compared to all those who have had direct experience.
- The Collaborative Forum Report that recommended this research and developed its own glossary to inform terminology and language, was delayed in its publication up to November 2022. It was not possible therefore to use it as much as we would have wanted to inform the early design of the research.
- We come from the perspective of social scientists and social historians. Specialists in language and sociolinguists are likely to have provided further analyses and recommendations. We support the Collaborative Forum Report Recommendations for a working group with a wider range of expertise, including those with direct experience, to lead on further dialogue and action in relation to language, terminology and mis/representation.

What were the main findings?

See **Table 1**, Page 3

See **Key Messages**, Page 5

| Main themes discussed | Details of language, terminology and representation discussed | Main findings |
|--|--|---|
| Terminology relating to 'mother' | Birth mother Adoptive mother Unmarried mother Expectant mother Natural mother Absence of birth father | <p>'Mother' was one of the words most often referred to with most respondents providing a perspective on the word and related terms. 'Unmarried mother' was universally rejected as unacceptable. The most discussed term was 'birth mother'.</p> <p>Several people disagreed with the term 'birth mother' and found it extremely offensive. Others thought the term accurately described the circumstances of the child's birth.</p> <p>We found no reference at all to birth father or adoptive father</p> <p>The findings relating to 'mother' show how words and terms used to represent mothers reflected the patriarchal traditional view of mothers and motherhood held by the Church and the State.</p> <p>Even though language has changed now (e.g., 'lone parent'), and the term 'mother' is recommended in recent legislation, people are still feeling stigmatised and labelled in the present day by terminology relating to mothers.</p> |
| Terminology relating to child/children | Illegitimate, illegitimacy, illegitimate child Bastard Adopted child/ adopted baby/baby/ adoptee | <p>Like mother, different terms to relate to children were emphasised as reflecting traditional views on parenthood and the family. Children born outside of marriage were treated in a very stigmatised and discriminatory way by Church/es, State and society.</p> <p>Even though 'illegitimate' has not been in legal use for decades, people are still offended by it as it appears in their records or in conversations with people/ professionals/state authorities about birth records, adoption information etc.</p> <p>Even though many people in the present use the term 'bastard' as a general term, not specifically relating to the derogatory description of a person born where the mother was not married, they need to realise how offensive it can be to people who were called this in the past and still are offended in the present.</p> |

| | | |
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| <p>Reference to places</p> | <p>Home Mother and Baby Home County home Institution Resident</p> | <p>Nobody agreed with use of the term home and preferred institutions. People did not feel like 'residents' or part of a 'family' as 'home' suggests. People preferred the term institution as a much better description. For others, prison, detention or slavery were words that fitted better.</p> |
| <p>Reference to processes of adoption/ being adopted</p> | <p>Forced adoption Illegal adoption Child trafficking Being chosen for adoption Seeking access to adoption birth certificate Accessing information</p> | <p>Mothers who gave birth and former children who were adopted (legally, forced or illegally) identified a lot of different words and terms that are offensive and problematic regarding:</p> <p>How people refer to adoption</p> <p>Information that is written on adoption and birth paperwork</p> <p>Getting access to documents in the first instance</p> |
| <p>Use of term survivor/victim</p> | <p>Mixed views on use of terminology Importance of choice Need to explore alternative terminology</p> | <p>The terminology of 'victim' and 'survivor' is very contested and complicated, with some people identifying with this and others finding it offensive. Many saw the need to have an alternative terminology. Some suggestions were:</p> <p>Referring to persons as 'separated' using the Gaelic term 'scaradh',</p> <p>Use the terminology of Citizens that connects with a human rights perspective</p> |
| <p>Language, terminology and representation by those with power to influence</p> | <p>Government Catholic Church MBHC Report Officers working in adoption and other relevant professionals Family members General society Media</p> | <p>The report has many examples of how use and misuse of stigmatising language by those on power has such an impact and needed to be changed.</p> <p>It shows how those with power to influence often misrepresented, disrespected and reinforced stigma by their use of language.</p> <p>Not listening, continuing to mis-use terminology and showing a judgemental and derogatory attitude to people was highlighted.</p> <p>How people in power, especially government, professionals and media can improve their use of language has been highlighted</p> |

Table 1: Summary of Findings from views of people with direct lived experience

10 Key Messages from this research

These messages are directed to a range of stakeholders including politicians and policy makers, professionals and others in authority, media, Church representatives, academics, researchers and members of the public.

1. Acknowledge and act when stigmatising language is used

‘Words are like weapons, and it is very hard to shake off the nasty things being said to you’

‘The cruelty of all of this needs to really be exposed. And I think that sanitising by way of language is a method of concealing what truly happened’

- Avoid and challenge terminology known to offend many people – such as ‘illegitimate’, ‘bastard’, ‘home’, ‘resident’.
- Terminology that is contested needs to be discussed, considered and managed – not avoided.

2. Accept the truth of people’s experiences

‘Truth is important and I think coming out of today, if we have truth and respect we have everything. But we don’t have either of those from Government as we stand’

‘Truth can be overpowering hurtful damaging, yet it is the crux of the starting point for us all to deal with truth in order to recover and heal as society, culture as respected equal humans with traffic past hurts’

- Actively promote truth telling in use of language and terminology, especially by those in positions of power and authority (e.g., Government, professionals, the media).
- Use terminology that recognises and acknowledges people’s experiences but do this in a sensitive and empathic way.

3. Ensure persons with lived experience have leadership in present and future actions

‘Anything that is written about us has to be written in reflection of us’

‘I was silent for years and then I started hearing myself saying I have a voice now because for years people have told me what to do’

- Ensure future work is inclusive and participative, with those directly affected having a leadership role.
- Find ways to enable everyone’s story to be heard and respected.
- Carefully listen to, acknowledge and believe those who are directly affected.
- Make the language simpler and clearer, recognising this is not about people’s inability to understand. It is about who holds the power to decide what language is appropriate and acceptable.

4. Avoid generalisations and prevent further stigmatisation

'It is my story and I have said it, I will always tell my own story, I don't need anybody else's, it is not my place'

But you see they didn't see us as real humans, they didn't see us as expectant mums... we just weren't seen. We were never described as real people. We were just clustered together and were known just as either 'unmarried mother' or 'birth mothers'

- All individuals have a right to make their own choice about language and how their identity is written and spoken about.
- Terminology should accurately reflect reality and experience.
- Respect the complexity and diversity of language and avoid generalisation.
- Show empathy toward people's experiences, be aware of how differently people have been affected and be more careful about use of labels and terminology that offends.

5. Focus on citizenship rights, entitlements and mutual respect

'Respect of us as humans. And the other one would be not to continue and reinforce old concepts. To open their minds, to open their hearts as well... We may never agree with each other, we may dislike what somebody else believes is okay or whatever. But in communications, in clear communications, if we can prioritise humans first then I think the rest will fall into place'

- Underpin actions with a human rights and transitional justice approach.
- Focus on citizenship rights and entitlements, mutual respect.
- Commit to a human rights approach, mutual respect, promotion of citizenship rights and entitlements directed by the principles of transitional justice.
- Be critically aware of power differentials, abuse of power and the need for affirmative actions to rebalance power towards those most directly affected.

6. Respect diversity of people's experiences of language, terminology and representation

'We are all different people with different stories'

'There is a lot of wonderful stories out there that should be shared and people like myself maybe who are less able in some sense to be able to share them, I think they should be encouraged that it is a positive environment'

'Language is not used necessarily to offend but to explain what happened to you specifically as a way of graphically describing what happened to me so as to distinguish it from something else'

- Respect diversity of opinion and difference in views and experience.
- Promote individuals' right to make their own choice about language and how their identity is written and spoken about.
- Recognise importance of inclusive education and awareness actions to inform present and future generations about diversity of language and experience.
- Use simple, clear and respectful terminology.

7. Face up to the history to inform present and future actions

'I am a living witness. It is not my history; it is my life'

'People don't really seem to have any understanding of the enormity and the lifelong impact'

'We shouldn't forget how people were referred to in the past and... how stigmatising that language was and how it landed on those people'

- Understand that intergenerational trauma and the process of trauma can be lifelong.
- Recognise some people are living history in the present.
- Recognise that language is constantly changing, and we need a balance between not forgetting the language of the past while also using more appropriate language in the present.

8. Find positive ways forward in collaboration

'I accept that and people have suffered challenges as a result and I kind of get that. But I think if we can... try and, not dress it up but make it as positive an outcome for everyone involved as possible and acknowledging the shortcomings that are there and evident and moving it on that way'

'By sharing it and putting the language in place... it gives me hope for the ones coming after because it is a dark period'

'We are looking for better words to describe it, I do think it is important that it isn't too nicey-nicey because it wasn't nice'

- Depending on what power you have, and what position you have as a key stakeholder, develop a specific action plan informed by the toolkit provided.
- Avoid a defensive stance if criticisms are directed in a way you may not agree with or wish to acknowledge.
- Stakeholders should use power and position to show leadership in responding proactively and humanely to the messages from the research and the recommendations.

9. Take responsibility and accountability for past actions of those in authority

'You are speaking over us; in fact it causes more problems. So, I would like that to happen. And I would like to actually do something with it and not just put it in a report and on a shelf to gather dust like all the other reports and... bills that they were going to bring. We are gone beyond patient at this stage, we want action, no more talk'

'I would love to see somebody just walk into that Dáil when they are in full session and say, excuse me boys but I am going to show you how to say the right word... And to teach them to cop on and to respect the people that was in those places, they weren't homes, they were whatever you want to call it, I get mad when I start talking about it'

- Accept that those in authority have significant influence over terminology and language either through ignoring views or through promoting education and awareness to ensure more sensitive and informed use of terminology.
- Explicitly recognise the power of language, its impact and reach.
- All stakeholders should take affirmative action to directly address the ongoing stigmatising effect of certain language and terminology in present and future practice, written and spoken.

10. Develop education and awareness raising actions

‘What you are saying may have a huge impact on the person sitting next to you or facing you or the stranger at the bus stop or sitting next to you on an aeroplane’

‘Better education and awareness will also help people to learn about the words of the past and the impact they had so that they won’t ever use them with their children because they will know how damaging they can be and hopefully their children will never find themselves in any situation that I found myself in’

‘There should be compassion shown going on in terminology and in the reports themselves. This is what was said, and this happened and what shouldn’t have been said. What should have been said probably is this is an awful thing that has happened, I hope you will be able to put it behind you, you will never forget, but maybe you will learn to live with it’

- Education and awareness raising for government ministers, policy makers, the media and others in positions of authority and the public.
- Education and awareness and education programmes to be inclusive and representative of people with direct lived experience.
- Separate guidance and actions (as detailed in the report) need to be developed for politicians and policy makers, professionals and those in authority, the media, representatives of the various churches and religious bodies.



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