

**Statement by the Oral History Network of Ireland on the role of oral testimony in the  
Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes  
5 June 2021**

In light of Professor Mary Daly's Oxford University Seminar on the work of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes on 2 June, the Oral History Network of Ireland (OHNI) wishes to place on record its opposition to the Commission's unacceptable treatment of survivors' testimonies. Professor Daly confirmed that evidence given by 550 people before the Confidential Committee of the Commission was entirely discounted in the formulation of the final report on the grounds that, legally, only the evidence sworn before the main commission could be included. As many legal experts have made clear,<sup>i</sup> in the intervening period, this was in direct contravention of the Terms of Reference for the Commission laid out in Article 4(c) of the 2015 Statute. It explicitly allowed the Commission to take account of the Confidential Committee's evidence 'to the extent it considers appropriate'.<sup>ii</sup> It also became clear, during Professor Daly's seminar, that the commissioners did not see the utility of the oral evidence provided nor the need to treat it in the same way as the documentary records which they relied so heavily upon. The Confidential Committee Report explicitly refers to the 'contamination'<sup>iii</sup> of the oral evidence provided by victims and survivors of mother and baby homes and this perception of oral evidence as unreliable and of lesser importance was re-stated throughout the seminar.

As the national representative body for oral historians in Ireland, OHNI is compelled to counter this dismissive and inaccurate portrayal of oral testimony. OHNI advocates for best practice in the collection, archiving and dissemination of oral history and brings together oral history practitioners for the support and promotion of the discipline of oral history in Ireland. Ethically informed, robustly designed, survivor-centred oral history projects have the potential to unlock missing evidence and stand as the only historical source which can truly illuminate the lived experiences of those for whom little documentary evidence exists. Uncovering these experiences was a key part of the Commission's remit.<sup>iv</sup> As a unique historical tool, oral history allows us to enter into conversation with those who have experienced historical events, but its use requires sensitivity as well as methodological, legal and ethical rigour and this is never more so than when asking individuals to recall traumatic events.

Trauma oral history relies on the expertise of the interviewer to connect with the person they are interviewing, creating a supportive, trusting environment to sensitively elicit testimony and minimise the risk of re-traumatising and re-silencing. At its best, it gives agency to those who have been denied it, giving witness to unspoken experiences. In so doing, it addresses wider

silences and contributes to public understanding of complex and controversial historical events. It is to the detriment of its final report that the Commission did not employ oral history as part of its methodological toolkit, relying instead on an archival corpus that was inherently biased against survivors. Providing institutions and organisations named in the drafts of the final report a right to respond while neglecting to afford survivors the same right only furthered this bias. Professor Daly's statements that the oral testimony given to the Commission was of limited use in the crafting of its report, speaks to the absence of oral history expertise among the Commission's researchers and an outmoded positioning of oral testimony that places it as lesser than written sources. This perspective fails to account for the fact that

... all evidence is socially constructed, all is a product of a purpose, and many documents were deliberately shaped to present a particular picture of interpretation of an event or phenomenon. In this sense then, there is little distinction to be made between an oral history interview based on memory and a minute of a meeting, also reconstructed in part based on memory of what was said.<sup>v</sup>

Personal testimony, particularly when it is given as part of a body of interviews, provides us with information and perspectives that immeasurably contribute to the completeness of our understanding of events in the past.

Ethically responsible oral history demands:

- An interviewee-centred process which prioritises the well-being and dignity of those sharing their testimony and puts this at the heart of all project structures and methodologies, including providing supports for those giving their testimony.
- Specialised training for interviewers including an understanding of sensitive approaches to memory and trauma interviewing; relationship and trust building and honouring commitments made to interviewees.
- Ensuring informed consent at all stages of the process so that interviewees are engaged with how their testimony will be used, stored, and managed in the future.
- Robust legal and ethical structures to protect all participants in the project.

There are many excellent examples of survivor-centred oral history projects in Ireland which have been designed and conducted on the basis of best practice in memory and trauma research. These include the Clann project; the Waterford Memories Project; the Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922-1990 project; and we look forward to the outcomes of the ongoing Tuam Oral History Project.<sup>vi</sup>

Glaringly absent in the Commission's operation, is the foregrounding of another key fundamental of oral history – the creation and preservation of testimony that is available for future generations. Where sensitive and traumatic accounts are recorded, it is to be expected that not all participants will be willing to share their testimony immediately or in the future; but this should be facilitated for those who wish to do so. The attempted destruction of all materials by the Commission is akin to the poor record keeping of archival sources so strongly decried by Professor Daly; but here, a more sinister issue emerges. Survivors report a lack of transparency about how their recorded testimony would be treated in the future. Transcripts were made available only on request and only after the Report was published, at which point

the entire archive was deleted without consultation with those who had contributed. The inaccuracies and misrepresentations which characterise the paraphrasing and use of direct quotes from many of the testimonies in the Report further highlight the disregard of these personal testimonies.<sup>vii</sup> In addition, the fact that deleted data has been recovered and reconfigured is evidence of poorly developed protocols for the effective destruction of records of those individuals who had requested total confidentiality and a deletion of their records.

OHNI condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the appalling treatment of survivor testimony by the Commission. Victims and survivors demonstrated great courage in coming forward to speak and their valour has been poorly rewarded by a flawed ethical and methodological approach that has silenced them for a second time.

Signed The Board and Steering Committee of the Oral History Network of Ireland

---

<sup>i</sup> Interventions by Maeve O'Rourke & Máiréad Enright in newspapers, on radio and via Twitter in the immediate aftermath of the Oxford seminar are of particular note.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/si/57/made/en/print> (accessed 03/06/21).

<sup>iii</sup> Report of the Confidential Committee to the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (2020) p.12. (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d693a-report-of-the-confidential-committee-to-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes-october-2020/>) (accessed 03/06/21).

<sup>iv</sup> Article 1(i) & (ii) of the Statute request the Commission to establish: 'the circumstances and arrangements for the entry of single women into these institutions and the exit pathways on their leaving these institutions; this to include consideration of the extent of their participation in relevant decisions' and 'the living conditions and care arrangements experienced by residents during their period of accommodation in these institutions, including by reference to the literature on the living conditions and care experienced by mothers and children applying more generally during the period' (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/si/57/made/en/print>) (accessed 03/06/21).

<sup>v</sup> Abrams, Lynn: *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, New York 2010), p. 80.

<sup>vi</sup> Clann Project (<http://clannproject.org/>) (accessed 04/06/21); Waterford Memories Project (<https://www.waterfordmemories.com/home>) (accessed 04/06/21); Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922-1990 Report (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-report-mother-and-baby-homes-and-magdalene-laundries-northern-ireland>) (accessed 04/06/21); Tuam Oral History Project (<https://www.nuigalway.ie/tuam-oral-history/>) (accessed on 04/06/21).

<sup>vii</sup> For more details on this see Crowe, C. 'The commission and the survivors' in *the Dublin Review*, (<https://thedublinreview.com/article/the-commission-and-the-survivors/>) (accessed 04/06/21).