

‘They are not a very Good Social Element even in the Workhouse’: The Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland (1906) and the Workhouse Mother

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Abstract. This article examines the representation of mothers, particularly unmarried mothers, within the Irish workhouse system during the nineteenth century as framed by the poor law reform efforts of the Vice-Regal Commission (1906). Established under the Irish Poor Law (1838), the workhouse was designed as a site of relief for the destitute, but proved ill-suited to the needs of women and children, whose presence conflicted with the law's principles. The Commission's report is analysed to show how the official discourse shaped societal perceptions of poverty and motherhood, despite little legislative change resulting from the report. Class and gender biases are explored through the role of women guardians within the workhouse system. The analysis of the Commission's findings reveals the deep-rooted social stigmas that marginalised unmarried mothers faced under the Irish Poor Law at the turn of the twentieth century. Ultimately, this article highlights the disparities between those administering relief and those reliant on it, exposing the limitations of the poor law reform in addressing women's lived experiences.

Keywords: Irish Poor Law, unmarried mothers, gender and class, social reports, workhouse

The *1906 Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform* largely viewed impoverished motherhood through a moral lens that categorised women according to respectability and sexual behaviour. This article examines how these binaries were articulated in the Commission's evidence and testimony, offering a critical reading of the ways poor mothers, especially those who had children outside marriage, were cast as either redeemable or irredeemable. Such reductive classifications overlooked the structural forces shaping women's entry into the workhouse, and the realities of maternal care within it. Mothers and their children sought relief in the Irish workhouse throughout the nineteenth century, yet the institution was not designed for them. Their presence contradicted the

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principles of the Poor Law (Ireland) (1838), and contributed to the establishment of the Vice-Regal Commission, whose chief recommendation was the workhouse's abolition. The workhouse was intended to relieve 'healthy' destitute persons unable to provide for themselves due to poor employment or meagre wages, but, since the Famine, the Commissioners noted that the "number of able-bodied destitute inmates fell away" (Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, 1906). By the late 1850s, admissions of able-bodied paupers had declined, and legislation, such as the Medical Charities Act (1851), removed the sick from the general workhouse, placing them in infirmaries and providing free dispensary care. This shift drew attention to the other classes of inmates – women and children – whose welfare remained under the remit of the local boards of guardians, and, in turn, the wider officialdom.

This article analyses the social discourses surrounding 'unmarried mothers' in the Vice-Regal Commission's report, deconstructing the representation of these women. The Commission claimed that there were four 'kinds' of mothers who entered the workhouse. These included mothers of 'first-born illegitimate children'; mothers of 'two or more illegitimate children' and mothers of 'legitimate children', and these women were classified as either 'respectable' or 'ill-conducted'. Mothers of 'illegitimate children' were not further categorised as 'respectable' or 'ill-conducted' as their very status as an 'unmarried mother' already *negatively* categorised their behaviour according to officials. This article assesses how such categorisations impacted upon policymaking. These women and their children proved to be a leading concern for the Commissioners. In fact, despite the various other issues with the Irish Poor Law that had provoked the calls for reform, the Commissioners insisted that on no other matter of their inquiry did they have 'a more definite opinion' than on "the unfitness of a workhouse as a refuge or asylum for mothers of illegitimate children". The Commissioners feared that housing 'unmarried mothers' alongside other inmates risked spreading vice and disrupted the moral tone on which the workhouse system was founded.

On 11 March 1905, across the 159 workhouses in Ireland, there were 45,195 'inmates', of whom 2,150 were 'unmarried mothers' – equating to just under 5 per cent of the total number of paupers relieved inside of the institution, but this cohort of poor women gained disproportionate attention in the Commission's recommendations and discourse as this article outlines. The workhouse provided the only form of relief for 'unmarried mothers' as their ability to seek support from their children's fathers was not legally possible. Unlike places such as England where limited legal mechanisms could enforce paternal responsibility, no such provision existed in Ireland. Consequently, Irish 'unmarried mothers' were more exposed than their counterparts in England, as dependence on the workhouse left them vulnerable both materially and to the stigma attached to institutional relief. Through a close analysis of the discourse relating to 'unmarried mothers' in the Vice-Regal Commission (1906), this article thematically deconstructs the main concerns such women presented. It demonstrates how we can evaluate such sources to understand how women were being viewed and treated during the long nineteenth-century.

An exploration of the Irish Poor Law at the turn of the twentieth century positions the ‘unmarried mother’ at the centre of the official discourse. Historians have highlighted the period’s importance for the development of maternal care, the morality of poverty, and the institutionalisation of ‘unmarried mothers’, but more remains to be disentangled about how social and official discourses on motherhood shaped the ways impoverished mothers were being viewed, treated and often ostracised from their communities (Earner-Byrne, 2007, 2023; Crossman, 2006, 2007; Luddy 2011). The ‘problem’ of the ‘unmarried mother’ is not unique to this period, or, a specifically Irish exception. Thane (2011) reminds us that “unmarried motherhood is an experience as old as marriage itself, and one with which few societies have been at ease”. Female poverty, both in the past and present, has always been characteristically associated with motherhood. From the sixteenth century until the modern welfare state, Thane (2011) explains that “there has been conflict and uncertainty as to how mothers and their children should be supported: through forcing the father to pay or forcing the mother to work, from the public purse, or from a combination of these sources”. As a result, poor ‘unmarried mothers’ and their inability to provide for their children have often been publicly discussed and erroneously critiqued as a homogeneous cohort as this article explores.

In the American context, ‘unmarried mothers’ were equally as vulnerable to poverty as their English counterparts. Clement (1992) argues that, “in nineteenth-century cities, as today, female-headed families were frequently poor”. Female-headed families, or as they were contemporarily termed, ‘unmarried mothers’, were a category made up of various lived experiences of motherhood and poverty. Clement’s (1992) research into women’s access to poor relief demonstrates that relief was circumspective and deeply dependent on wider societal concerns rather than their specific and sincere needs. Even though employment opportunities in industrialised areas such as Philadelphia meant that women had better access to employment, for many, their maternal responsibilities challenged and jeopardised their ability to work and therefore made them reliant on poor relief. This was also the case in Ontario, Canada, where women and children made up eighty percent of the residents of the houses of industries between 1884 and 1912. The women who inhabited these establishments were usually the ‘breadwinner’ of their families as they had lost their husbands, had been deserted, or were unmarried (Ursel, 2005). Poor mothers in late nineteenth-century Irish society had more accessible entitlement to public relief when faced with the socio-economic challenges of motherhood than their American and Canadian counterparts through the workhouse system. Access to relief through the Irish Poor Law was morally administered as ‘unmarried mothers’ could only access support if they sought admission to the workhouse, whereas outdoor relief – aid provided in one’s own home – was available to widows with more than one child in their own homes (Crossman, 2013). This was unlike the legal situation that ‘unmarried mothers’ in England faced when attempting to procure relief from their children’s fathers. This difference between the Irish and English Poor Laws’ approaches to maintenance support was acknowledged in the reform efforts, but, despite the growing issue of such

mothers in the workhouse, the reform commission's final recommendation for unmarried mothers was to continue to be institutionalised and 'reformed' in disused workhouses.

Moral Classification and Social Inquiries

Earlier social inquiries have been studied for their insight into both the public and official outlook towards the poor given the rich testimonies of both within the reports. Through his analysis of the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland (1835), Ó'Ciosáin (1998) argues, that there was a 'well-defined category' of those considered to be deserving or undeserving of relief within Irish culture and society in the early nineteenth century. Importantly, as Ó'Ciosáin's (1998) work found, the 1835 Commission included the voice of the lower classes and the poor, which demonstrated that "the gap between official and popular views was not as complete as the commissioners themselves imagined or as a historian might assume". In contrast, the Vice-Regal Commission (1906) excluded testimonies from the poor, making any comparative analysis of the popular view on poverty unfeasible. This exclusion underscores the growing belief in the expertise of the middle and upper-class reformers who, by this time, were seen as more qualified to determine the conditions and needs of the poor. A similar pattern can be observed for England during this period. There was a wider United Kingdom investigation and desire to reform the poor law system that was not unique to Ireland. As Martin (2008) argues, the rise of social science during the period between the introduction of the English New Poor Law in the 1830s, until the Royal Commission (1905), contributed to the professionalisation of social welfare, shifting the focus away from direct participation of the poor in discussions about their relief. The work of the Commission in both Ireland and England reveals that Edwardian ideas of poverty and relief, and as well as attempts to reform the existing poor law systems, were shaped by attitudes of middle-and upper-class reformers who were influenced by new disciplinary research and the emerging field of social science, as well as their indirect contact with the poor themselves.

The moral classification of inmates based upon their behaviours had always been a feature of the Irish Poor Law with the desire to keep paupers of 'ill-conduct' (the undeserving poor) segregated from the morally pure inmates (the deserving poor) so that to prevent the 'contagion' of vice. Moral classification was also gendered and based upon the contemporary standards set for male and female behaviour. As Earner-Byrne (2023) outlines, "men were to be virile and brave and women pure and devout". 'Ill-conducted men' were those who engaged in criminal activities, whereas the gauge of morality for women was determined by their sexual behaviour. This materialised in the workhouse with the regulations that prostitutes and 'unmarried mothers' were to be housed in separate wards. The adherence to such moral classification was locally regulated and often depended on the logistics of individual workhouses and their rates of admissions. Crossman found that "a wide variety of approaches to classification" were practiced across

the country (2013). Separating ‘unmarried mothers’ from married mothers was desirable but not always practical. By 1883, there were “practically no able-bodied inmates in the workhouses”, and this was the demographic situation the Commissioners were faced with, which allowed for further moral scrutiny of the remaining ‘types’ of inmates. In contrast to the able-bodied paupers to which the system was designed for, the Vice-Regal Commission identified the ten cohorts of inmates that had been occupying the workhouse as the sick, ‘aged and infirm’, ‘lunatics’ (contemporary term used for those considered insane), ‘sane epileptics’, ‘unmarried mothers’, infants, children between infancy and fifteen years of age, ‘casuals or ins-and-outs’, ‘vagrants or tramps’, ‘able-bodied’. The segregation of paupers through these categories demonstrated that the Poor Law had developed to a system of relief for the marginalised and vulnerable groups of society. The Commission’s recommendations for how each cohort was to be assisted highlights the sophistication of the discourse relating to the ‘deserving’ versus the ‘undeserving’ recipients of relief since the establishment of the Poor Laws.

The Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform

Most workhouse inmates were Catholic, thus reflecting the majority of the population. The Commission as chaired by William Lawson (W.L.) Micks, a Protestant Commissioner of the Local Government Board, and included Dr Edward Coey Bigger, a Presbyterian medical officer from Belfast, and George Murnaghan, a Catholic former local magistrate and board of guardians’ chairman. The Commissioners spent over three years collecting testimony from across Ireland on the operation of workhouses. In October 1906, the Commissioners presented their findings and recommendations in a three-volume report. The first volume was an eighty-page report in the form of the findings and recommendations of the Commission which were thematically arranged. The second volume was an appendix that provided tabulated data on the questionnaire returns from the 159 unions relating to the admissions, administration, and finances of the unions. The third volume was another appendix which consisted of nearly 1,000 pages of testimonies presented verbatim. Additionally, this appendix provided an index which was arranged by the ‘subjects’ of the discussions, and it also included a list of the names of all 743 witnesses who contributed evidence at the various public sittings. The Commissioners recommended a complete restructure of the Irish Poor Law. The 159 workhouse sites, including the infirmaries and fever hospitals, were to be used specifically and only for the sick. All other workhouse inmates were to be removed from the workhouse and segregated into specific state-ran institutions. The infirm and aged were recommended to be housed together in ‘alms-houses’, whereas the ‘insane’ in ‘county district lunatic asylums’, with the exception of ‘sane epileptics’ who were to be treated in two central institutions under the management of the inspectors of lunatics. Inmates who belonged to the vagrant, casual and ‘adults of bad character’ classes were to be relieved in newly formed ‘Labour-Houses’. ‘Unmarried mothers’ were to ‘never’ be admitted into any workhouse in the future, but sent to ‘special institutions’ run by poor law officials and

religious groups wherever possible. Charles Eason (1907), a witness to the Commission, reviewed the Report for the *Economic Journal* and anticipated that the new classification and segregation of inmates in specific state-ran institutions, 'especially women' who were 'persons of bad character', was 'novel and far-reaching.' However, he supported the recommendation and insisted that full justification and 'facts' were provided for such in the Report which he believed was an 'extremely interesting' and an 'important State-paper' that ought to be read in full before casting judgement on the recommendations.

'Girls' on 'First Lapse'

'Unmarried mothers' on their first pregnancy were recommended to be provided for in 'special institutions' under 'religious or philanthropic management'. The Commissioners' angst over the issue of unmarried motherhood was centred upon their assumption that the workhouse caused generational cycles of illegitimacy. They reported that they:

frequently found in the workhouse an illegitimate baby, its mother, and its grandmother; and in one case we were shown in the same workhouse, a baby, its mother, its grandmother, and its great-grandmother, or four illegitimate generations in the female line.

The Commissioners' account of 'four illegitimate generations' was loosely reported, without direct evidence, and notably ignored the fathers' role in these circumstances. The fear of generational unmarried motherhood in the workhouse was compounded by the assumption that lax morality and vice was contagious. The pertinence of such women being segregated in specific 'special institutions' was recommended with the hope that they would never 'have freedom of ingress or egress' or 'associate' with any other classes. The Commissioners were concerned that first-time mothers had 'opportunity' to engage with 'fallen' women, and "in most cases girls lose a sense of shame and become more and more degraded". They believed that the proposed system would be of financial benefit *in lieu* of the current system which, as they argued, made 'unmarried mothers' lifelong inmates. If 'first cases' were sent to 'special institutions', it was perceived that 'very few girls' would 'fall a second time'. This focus on 'first cases' and segregation reflected that the Commissioners' concern was as much about moral reform as it was about financial efficiency. The expenses relating to relieving first-time 'unmarried mothers', or 'girl-mothers' as the Commission termed them, would only be for one to two years, rather than the present system which saw guardians support these "girls or women and their children practically for life". These 'special institutions' were proposed as a morally and economically superior system of dealing with the 'problem' of unmarried motherhood which the workhouse was believed to encourage rather than alleviate.

It was emphasised that 'workhouse life' tended to 'debase' all 'unmarried mothers', and therefore prevented potentially 'reclaimable' first-time fallen 'girls' from returning to virtue. Consequently, it was of the 'greatest importance' that 'girls' on their 'first lapse' should be sent to a specific institution prior to confinement which was to be managed by religious communities or philanthropic persons. The Commissioners claimed

that when a 'girl' became pregnant outside of marriage, she was "rarely able in Ireland to return to her home owing to the sentiment of aversion from immorality which [was] too strong in most parts of the country to permit her to face that feeling and to return with her baby to her relatives, even if they would receive her". These 'girls' had no choice then but to submit to the workhouse for relief, and, when admitted, they were housed with the 'ill-conducted' mothers. In the 'enormous majority' of such cases, according to the Commissioners, such 'girls' became comfortable with their 'companions and surroundings' in the workhouse, and, when they left the institution, they soon felt compelled to return out of 'necessity' or as "their own blunted feeling incline[d] them". The use of the term 'girl' and 'girl-mother' in the context of first-time 'unmarried mothers' did not relate specifically to the mother's age. Although it was very likely that many of the first-time mothers that used the workhouse for birth were young, the tone in which the term 'girl' was being used reflected the sense of immaturity that single women were perceived to have prior to marriage.

It was suggested that 'girls' ought to seek admission to the 'special institution' prior to their babies' births but would attend a local district hospital for the delivery and lying-in period. The mother and baby would then be required to return to the 'special institution'. During the first twelve months as a new mother, the 'girl' would be required to breastfeed her baby and would use the time in the 'special institution' to 'strengthen' her character. Only in cases when the mother could prove to the management of the 'special institution' that she could "properly maintain herself and her child" would she be allowed to take her child with her on her discharge. If not, the baby was to be boarded-out with the possibility of the mother regaining her "right to resume possession of the child" when she could prove that she was in a position to support it, and "that her conduct since the birth of the child had been good". The ability of a single mother to support herself and her child outside of the workhouse was very limited. Therefore, this recommendation, effectively, proposed separating mothers from their children on the premise of morality and poverty, thus penalising the poor 'girl-mother' for her behaviour rather than providing relief. The issue of 'girl-mothers' was of such significance to the Commissioners that they sought guidance on the subject 'informally' outside of the inquiry "with many who [had] a deep interest in it". They noted that "further details could be supplied if [their] general suggestions in this matter were approved either for first offenders or for subsequent cases". This suggests that the topic of 'unmarried mothers' in the workhouse weighed heavily on the Commissioners.

'Women after Subsequent Lapse'

'Unmarried mothers' who had more than one child were termed by the Commission as 'depraved cases'. Relieving these 'cases' inside the workhouse was considered particularly onerous to the Commissioners, and many of the witnesses who gave testimony advocated for the removal of such women from the workhouse. For example, Dublin Guardian, Mary Weldrick considered these 'depraved cases' as 'very bad women' who

represented a "great injustice to the respectable poor". She argued that such women should be 'separated entirely' from the married women and single girls and was in favour of segregating women distinctively on virtue of their marital status and the number of illegitimate children they had. Building upon suggestions such as Weldrick's, the Commission recommended that these 'depraved cases' ought to be dealt with in specific institutions. It was proposed that one of the potential disused workhouses in the Dublin area would be used as a central institution to receive mothers who had become pregnant in a 'subsequent lapse' to their first 'illegitimate child'. The Commissioners emphasised that they did not recommend "the separation of any mother and infant until the child [had been] weaned", but, after such, the baby would be boarded out. The Commissioners asserted that the state was 'quite justified' in removing the child from its 'unmarried mother' on the basis that she had previously had a child. They claimed, "in our opinion, such separation ought as a rule be final, leaving it open to a mother to show that her character and resources are such as would justify the local authority in restoring her child to her". Such mothers, it was mused, might then be 'detained' in one of the religious institutions. Under these poor law reform recommendations, therefore, women who became pregnant as a result of sex outside of marriage, on more than one occasion, were to be forcefully institutionalised.

This proposed increase of the state's control over the female reproductive body was not matched with any such recommendations for the men that impregnated unmarried women. This was significant when we consider Bock and Thane's (1991) claim that "social policies [...] shaped assumptions about gender relations, in particular about the gender divisions of labour, of power and of social responsibilities, with their primary assumption of each adult woman's dependency upon a male earner". The recommendations for 'unmarried mothers' in the Report further positioned women to depend on men, even though this had not been a successful approach thus far. Throughout the history of the Poor Law, men very rarely faced any consequences for participating in sexual digressions outside of marriage (Crossman, 2013). Under the Irish Poor Law, the unmarried mother bore the physical evidence of pre-marital sex, whilst the putative father's identity, in such a paternity case, had to be proven in court. This was not a simple feat. It involved the mother swearing an affidavit on oath before one or more justices of the peace in the local petty sessions court. Her statement was then formally examined, and she needed to provide supporting evidence that the accused was her child's father. It was a very difficult task for a woman to prove a man was her child's father which was made more difficult by a legal system that favoured protecting men's reputations over women's ability to support their children.

Throughout its lifespan, the workhouse was blamed for encouraging illegitimacy. Yet, the patriarchal Poor Law (Ireland) Amendment Act (1862) mandated that 'unmarried mothers' had to submit to the workhouse in order to prosecute their baby's putative father. As such, the socio-economic challenges which 'unmarried mothers' faced were a result of the workhouse system rather than an exploitation of the relief it provided within it. It was only when the child became a burden on the poor rates as an inmate was the

putative father liable for its maintenance. This support was payable to the guardians, and not to the mother. Therefore, once the mother left the workhouse, the father was no longer legally obliged to support her or her child. Advocating for the amendment of the law relating to the maintenance of ‘illegitimate children’, William Lawson (1914) acknowledged that this “law was very hard on the woman”. He noted that, because of this system, ‘unmarried mothers’ could “not leave the workhouse without leaving the child”, and often there were mothers who had to remain in the workhouse with their children for “three, four, or five years”. This indicates that many ‘unmarried mothers’ remained in the workhouse primarily to keep their children, rather than out of reliance on relief.

The law relating to the maintenance of ‘illegitimate children’ legalised the institutionalisation of ‘unmarried mothers’ and their children. However, procuring maintenance under this system was not a simple endeavour for the local boards of guardians given the issue of determining paternity and the costs associated with bringing men to court. According to Crossman (2013), “many boards of guardians regarded this process as more trouble than it was worth, but some did attempt to make use of it”. Consequently, the maintenance expense usually fell to the local rate payer as the mother had no legal right to pursue the father in her own name. This was not the case for ‘unmarried mothers’ in England, and some Irish poor law officials testified to the Commission that the law ought to be changed in Ireland to reflect the English Bastardy Laws Act (1872). However, the Commissioners focused on reforming ‘first-time offenders’. Despite the support from ‘a great many’ testimonies, the suggestion to change the maintenance law received little consideration in their final report and recommendations. They discussed it briefly:

We do not see any objection to such a change in the law, but we do not like to make any direct recommendation in favour of it, as we feel that there may be considerations in opposition to such a proposal though we are not aware of them. We merely refer to the evidence we have received, and state, that as far as we can see, the *object* of the witnesses in endeavouring to enforce payment from the father is one that altogether meets with our approval.

For the Commissioners, ‘reforming’ women’s sexual behaviour through institutionalisation was a more fitting solution to the issue of illegitimacy rather than legally acknowledging men’s role in the practice of sex outside of marriage. The desire to ‘reform’ mothers of multiple ‘illegitimate children’ and to legislate the removal of such children on the premise of their mother’s sexual conduct elucidates the moral sophistication of poor relief that had developed under the Irish Poor Law.

Married Mothers of ‘Legitimate Children’

Married mothers were also at risk of losing their children under the commissioners’ recommendations if they were ‘ill-conducted’ as ‘*married*’ was “by no means synonymous with *respectability* [sic]”. These ‘most troublesome’ inmates of the workhouse did not meet the criteria of ‘respectable’ despite being married. This ‘class’ of mothers was considered to be “just as hopeless from the point of view of the proper bringing up

of children" as 'unmarried mothers'. These were women who, according to the Commissioners, for 'one reason or another' had been lifelong paupers and were sometimes married to 'male chronic paupers'. It was claimed that many of these 'ill-conducted' married women had had 'illegitimate children' before getting married, and even after legitimising their unions, "the moral character of many [was] reputed to be [as] bad after marriage". To assess whether such married mothers were allowed to 'remain in charge' of their children, a 'formal determination' by management of the local authority was to be conducted to ascertain if she was 'fit' to mother. When questioned by the Commissioners about removing children from unfit parents, Dublin Guardian Emily Buchanan pondered that it was a "very questionable thing", but not because it interfered with the parent-child relationship. Rather, she was concerned that it would "relieve the parent of the responsibility of their children". She was a long-serving inspector for boarded-out children of the South Dublin Union Workhouse, so her understanding of women's use of the workhouse was grounded in her experience of working with such paupers. In line with Buchanan's testimony, the final recommendations of the Commission were that married mothers of 'ill-conduct' should be further institutionalised in separate facilities to their children. Under their proposed scheme, if it was decided by the local authorities that a mother was not morally suited to rear her children, such women were to be treated like the other 'casual' and 'vagrant' classes and sent to a 'Labour-House'. It was recommended that four 'Labour-Houses' needed to be established across the country to deal with any individuals who were found 'begging', or "dependent on the public for their support". Under this new approach, such individuals would be 'detained' by an order from a court of justice for a period of one to three years "for the purpose of accustoming them to habits of sobriety, regularity, and industry". This approach effectively criminalised poverty, framing destitution and dependence as moral failings that required correction through confinement and labour. The Commission's recommendation to house 'ill-conducted' mothers in these new institutions demonstrates the vilified image that such women held in the reform efforts.

Under no circumstance was any mother to be housed in the same institution as her children through these poor law reform recommendations. This was unlike the system under the Commissioner's review which had always housed all family members within the one workhouse. Upon admission, parents were separated from their children (over the age of two) for the duration of their stay. This was to prevent exposure to 'corruption' and 'danger' which, many philanthropists and ordinary members of society believed, the children would otherwise be facing at the workhouse (Crossman, 2013). The current regulations allowed parents access to their children while in the workhouse, but this was locally regulated and required pre-arranged permission. This parental visitation regulation reflected the overarching structure of the workhouse system which was designed to discourage individuals, especially those with children, from seeking refuge. The new recommendations sought to prevent children from having any interaction with pauperism, or their parents, if they were considered chronic paupers of ill-conduct.

The separation of mothers from their children was the Commission's recommendation for women whose sexual and moral behaviours did not conform to the criteria of respectability – whether they were married or not. Married and respectable mothers were 'rarely' found in the workhouse, as it was considered a 'place of torture' for their class. Unlike 'unmarried mothers', the Commissioners found it "difficult to make a definite suggestion under [their] scheme" for married women's relief. The only plausible solution for such women was outdoor relief and the option to have their children "temporarily boarded out" or sent to an industrial school. The Commission insisted that such respectable mothers rarely seek relief in the workhouse. Rather, "really well-behaved parents and children reduced to a state of destitution by unfortunate circumstances" were more likely to be supported by charitable societies or local charitable people. The 'respectable' married woman, according to the Commissioners, was usually a 'helpless' widow, with one legitimate child only, and she as such was not eligible for outdoor relief. The Commissioners did not understand why such widows were excluded from being eligible for outdoor relief and they recommended, "in accordance with the suggestions of many witnesses", that any 'respectable widow' with only one legitimate child be eligible for outdoor relief. However, married 'respectable' women, outside of widowhood, sought relief in the workhouse and did so under circumstances of dire poverty, ill-health, and during difficult pregnancies. The Commissioners failed to thoroughly acknowledge the role of the workhouse in the maternal lives of women who had little medical alternatives as their attention was centred upon 'unmarried mothers' and the removal of such women and their children from the workhouse.

The increased desire for the state to remove poor mothers' parental rights must be understood within the shifting perspectives on childhood. Ferriter (2009) outlines that, during this period, "officially, children were beginning to be noticed as individuals susceptible to neglect and ill treatment". This brought poor mothers' mothering abilities under scrutiny, as evident in the cases of child neglect brought forward by philanthropic child-saving organisations. Buckley (2008) explains that there was "a genuine concern for the children" brought under the inspection of the *National Society for the Prevent of Cruelty to Children* (NSPCC), but that "this was not the case with regard to the parents being scrutinised". The NSPCC was a society distinctively managed, administered and funded by the upper classes. Buckley's analysis of the inspector reports of the NSPCC argues that the language used to describe poor parents projected "images of degenerate, incapable and abnormal individuals". The inspectors were capable of interpreting cases of neglect based upon their own perceptions of parenting, and Buckley (2008) argues that "how these middle-to-upper classes interpreted the laws impacted largely how the lower-classes were treated and how such individuals were viewed in the wider public". A similar conclusion on how poor mothers were discussed in the Vice-Regal Commission highlights the disconnect between those administering relief and the realities faced by those seeking support.

The recommendation to remove children from poor 'unmarried mothers' and 'ill-conducted' married mothers reflected a new era in child-welfare provisions. Most no-

tably, the Children's Act (1908) saw the state legitimise its role as a *de facto* parent for children whose own parents did not meet the standards set out by the middle-to-upper classes. This legislation reflected the increase of surveillance and control brought into the lives of poor parents which had developed since the 1880s. Buckley (2013) argues that the subsequent increase in child welfare provisions under the NSPCC's influence highlights the significant role class and gender played in the society's outlook towards adequate experiences of childhood, childrearing, and childcare. She further contends that the increase in state-led initiatives, especially the growing role of the NSPCC in state policy-making, sought to punish destitution and inherently linked the mistreatment of children to poverty, instead of making any substantial attempt to alleviate the cause of the impoverishment. The discourse relating to mothers in the Vice-Regal Commission reflected the growing influence organisations such as the NSPCC and the upper-classes' had in the developed increased interest in the lives of the poor.

Conclusion

The *Lancet* (1906) called the Vice-Regal Commission's report "an extremely interesting and revolutionary one, condemnatory of the whole Irish poor-law system, and proposing an entirely new system of relief in its place". Despite such 'revolutionary' ambitions and public and official support, the Vice-Regal Commission and its role in pinpointing the inadequacies of the poor law system resulted in little legislative changes. Retrospectively, however, we must evaluate the weight that social inquiries, like this report, held in marginalising specific sections of society and, consequently, influenced the way such cohorts were being treated. The desire amongst officials to further segregate and institutionalise particular cohorts reflected the dual purpose of 'reforming' the individual while also keeping them away from society. This 'reform' aspect of relief mirrored the approaches of other institutions of containment. Cox (2018) explains that "isolating inmates from their communities allowed, advocates argued, the subjects of reform – children, prisoners, single mothers, the mentally ill – to be removed from external sources of contamination, thus ensuring the success of the distinctive 'reformative' models". The findings of the Report, subsequently, were to reinforce the categorisation of those seeking support into distinctive institutions with the added caveat of specific establishments for 'unmarried mothers' and their infants with the desire to 'reform' 'first-time offenders'.

The men who served as the Commissioners and those who gave testimony held positions of power and prestige that must have made it difficult for them to understand the realities of impoverished motherhood. Women guardians did little to improve the class prejudices intertwined within the system, especially with regard to mothering. Not only were those who standardised appropriate parenting styles from a different socio-economic background and, therefore, were incapable of understanding poor mothers' plights, but they were often women who did not have any children themselves. Buckley (2008) acknowledges the help organisations such as the NSPCC had in supporting some poor families, but argues that "the positive results were limited, and in general the focus

on neglect served mainly to perpetuate class and gender inequalities”. The same cohort’s efforts to ‘save’ children from generational pauperism or ill-conducted mothers in the workhouse, ultimately, punished women for their sexual behaviours as opposed to supporting them in their mothering.

The Vice-Regal Commission’s Report served as a piece of print culture that stereotyped ‘unmarried mothers’. The representation of mothers in the report did not adequately acknowledge that the way unmarried and married mothers used the workhouse was complex, and, in many cases, it was a last resort which was based on dire circumstances of health and poverty. The perception of morality was of little significance when women found themselves in distress, despite it being a major concern for the Commissioners. The official perception of unmarried motherhood, as outlined in this Report, most likely did not impede on women’s decision-making when in need of relief. As Purdue (2011) outlines, “for those ostracised by society, the workhouse at least provided a roof over their heads, a degree of health-care provision and a meal from time to time”. This Report and its position regarding impoverished mothers situated their entitlement to relief within the perceptions of morality and respectability which fundamentally dictated the way poor women were being treated and regulated. Its classification of workhouse mothers as ‘unmarried mothers’ with first child, ‘unmarried mothers’ of multiple children, ‘ill-conducted mothers’ of legitimate children, and ‘respectable mothers’ of legitimate children paid little attention to the broader complexities of women’s circumstances and their reliance on the workhouse. These moralistic attitudes persisted well into the twentieth century, which is reflected in the proliferation on institutions designed to confine ‘unmarried mothers’ and separate them from both society and their children (see Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, 2021).

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