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Lorraine Grimes

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# 'We did what needed to be done': Cherish, the first support group for unmarried mothers in Ireland

Lorraine Grimes 

## ABSTRACT

Historically, unmarried mothers have suffered greatly in Irish society. Advocacy for unmarried mothers began in the 1970s with the emergence of the women's movement in Ireland. 'Cherish' became one of the first organisation in Ireland to push for rights for unmarried mothers. This article is the first comprehensive study into the organisation exploring its establishment and development throughout the late twentieth century. Against the backdrop of the larger women's movement, this article focuses on the early years of the campaign incorporating the push for unmarried mothers allowance; accommodation assistance offered; advice on legal issues including maintenance; as well as lobbying politicians on legislative change. It incorporates the organisation's connection with the Catholic Church whilst simultaneously and unapologetically challenging Archbishop Dermot Ryan on prejudices against unmarried mothers. In the 1980s, the group faced new challenges as more women with unplanned pregnancies sought information on abortion. The organisations link with the Catholic Church diminished throughout the 1980s as Cherish began to direct women to abortion information helplines and openly supported the Defend the Clinics Campaign, despite their receipt of state funding. The establishment of Cherish and its commitment to advocacy for women in crisis pregnancy has been somewhat overlooked in the historical analysis of the Irish women's movement.

## KEYWORDS

Unmarried mothers; single mothers; second-wave feminism; the women's movement

## Introduction

The institutionalisation and historical treatment of unmarried mothers in Ireland has recently gained much scholarly attention highlighting the oppressive shame and stigma associated with unmarried motherhood for much of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Advocacy for unmarried mothers' in Ireland emerged as part of an international movement of second-wave feminism.<sup>2</sup> The progression of the women's movement and the advancing position of women in society led a gradual change in the perception and treatment of unmarried mothers.<sup>3</sup> Linda Connolly states that, in general there was a tremendous advancement of voluntary agencies for women in 1970s Ireland, including Well Woman Centre, Women's Aid, and others which portrays the imperative role organisations play as a conduit of a social movement.<sup>4</sup> Cherish was founded in 1971 and was the first self-help lobby group for unmarried mothers in Ireland. It offered assistance

to all unmarried mothers which included, finding accommodation and employment, and providing items such as baby clothes, prams, and much more. Not only did Cherish offer practical assistance for unmarried mothers, it was also a major pressure group for the introduction of unmarried mothers allowance, access to adequate accommodation, the removal of the status of illegitimacy, and changes to the family maintenance legislation. The establishment of the organisation by unmarried mothers themselves was in itself radical, and the support it offered to unmarried mothers was invaluable. This article includes critical analysis of archival records including social workers reports and minutes of meetings of Cherish. The article also utilised oral history interviews. Two interviews were carried out by the author for the purpose of a PhD thesis, on which this article is based. Two additional interviews carried out by Linda Connolly on her research on the women's movement in Ireland, have also been included. These interviews have recently become available in the Digital Repository of Ireland. Interviews with activists demonstrate the achievements of the group and also portray the personal toll of activism. As the organisation moved from a grassroots campaign towards an established organisation with State funding, this no doubt, created tensions between service provision and lobby work. While Cherish was an autonomous organisation, and was not distinctly Catholic, it did hold some ties with the Catholic Church in the early years of its establishment. In the 1980s, the issue of abortion brought conflict. The question was, if the aim was to keep mother and child together, should they then provide information on abortion? As this article argues, reliance on state funding did not limited their capacity to lobby on legislative change and increases to social welfare. Cherish continued their advocacy and service work uncompromised by Church and State influences.

In 1960s and 1970s Ireland, there was still much shame and stigma surrounding unmarried motherhood. Institutionalisation was the only form of state assistance available for unmarried mothers however, the number of women entering these institutions was beginning to decline. In 1960, the Catholic Social Welfare Bureau stated that 'numbers in the Irish Mother and Baby Institutions are falling to 40 compared with 90, six or seven years ago.'<sup>5</sup> This was no doubt an impact of emerging changing position of women in society. The Irishwomen's movement, influenced by women's movements abroad in the UK and the US, began to challenge social norms.<sup>6</sup> Lindsey Earner-Byrne argues that in the early decades of the twentieth-century:

Irish legislators negotiated rigidly defined gender roles, strict moral codes and contradictory sexual behaviour when implementing welfare policy ... The protection and rights of the family and the institution of marriage were intended to reflect the cultural ideal reinforced by Catholic social teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Finola Kennedy argues that the family in the 1937 Constitution 'is the family which is founded on marriage.'<sup>8</sup> In 1942, with the introduction of Children's Allowance, unmarried mothers were excluded from the allowance. Mel Cousins argues the allowance was to protect the family unit supplementing the father's income, as breadwinner, rather than supersede it, in an effort to support large working-class families who were struggling on the poverty line.<sup>9</sup> While there was a widow's allowance, the general view was that, unlike unmarried mothers, widows were not at fault for their circumstances therefore, unmarried mothers remained unsupported.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s, the major issue for the women's movement in Ireland was reproductive rights and in particular, the legalisation of contraceptives.<sup>11</sup> Contraceptives and information on contraception were outlawed in Ireland under the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935. Although outlawed by the government and strongly deterred by the Catholic Church, thousands of Irish women were already accessing contraceptives.<sup>12</sup> The focus of the campaign included many other aspects including support for unmarried mothers. In 1971, the Irish Women's Liberation Movement called for the establishment of a centre which could advise and offer support, and press for legislative change for unmarried mothers. In their pamphlet *Chains or change?* they stated:

The unmarried mother who keeps her child does not officially exist as a class as far as the state is concerned. It is time she was recognised. The unmarried mother does not exist. We need a system for dealing with her problems which is less punishing and more aware of her and her child as a fatherless family.

The founder of Cherish, Maura (O'Dea) Richards, attended a Women's Liberation meeting and felt that unmarried mothers were being pushed down on the agenda.<sup>13</sup> Maura described her experience, 'what I got was a bunch of very middle-class women talking in very academic terms about unmarried mothers ... It was because of that group that I eventually met the other women who formed the core that finally became Cherish.'<sup>14</sup> Maura recalled a meeting where the group discussed the 'category' of unmarried mother that they were prepared to support.<sup>15</sup> They attempted to portray the 'respectability' of unmarried mothers, 'women who would have been in a relationship for at least two years would be respectable ... That kind of conversation was going on.'<sup>16</sup> Similar to other women's groups at the time, Laura Kelly argues that Irishwomen United and the Contraception Action Programme was composed of largely middle-class Irish women, including journalists, doctors, left-wing activists and stay-at-home mothers.<sup>17</sup> Kelly found that members of the group however, were conscious of their class and made efforts to reach out to working-class communities in Dublin.<sup>18</sup> These sentiments on class were felt by many activists within the women's movement. Mary O'Donnell stated that 'feminism has only achieved some kind of workable practice among middle class women mainly because they haven't got poverty.'<sup>19</sup> Cherish was formed in order to counter this.

## The formation of Cherish

Cherish was established independently from the women's liberation movement when founder Maura Richards decided to publish a Letter to the Editor in the *Irish Independent* encouraging unmarried mothers to meet at her house in Dublin. It stated:

We are a group of unmarried mothers who have mostly kept our babies. We meet regularly and our aim is to make representation to the Government on behalf of all women in our position to obtain recognition of this very curious social problem.<sup>20</sup>

It was the first time that unmarried mothers were meeting together in a formal capacity to form a group and demand a higher standard of living for themselves and their children. Maura said, 'the reaction to the ad in the paper! Unmarried mothers were coming out of the woodwork.'<sup>21</sup> Maura elaborated, 'people were terrified saying "why are all these unmarried mothers meeting in the one room?"' The group also received

some abusive letters from men, while other men wrote offering to marry them and be a father to their child.<sup>22</sup> Cherish officially launched in 1972. Maura described, ‘we had been sitting around in my kitchen talking, all these unmarried mothers, which was great, we had such great gatherings ... We had become a group and we had to have a name.’<sup>23</sup> CHERISH stands for Children Have Every Right in Society Here. It was also taken from the 1916 proclamation ‘Cherish all the children equally.’ Gráinne Farren, another activist within Cherish, wrote that the organisation took a ‘bottom up approach.’<sup>24</sup> Dr Mary Henry, former politician and medical doctor, said, ‘the great thing was they [unmarried mothers] started it themselves. It wasn’t started for them by something, an organisation where the protagonists were the real activators I think is absolutely essential ... I used to feel so brave going in to see them.’<sup>25</sup>

In the 1970s, the Catholic Church held a monopoly with regard to the services for unmarried mothers. Mother and Baby Institutions were still in operation but there were discussions in the 1970s to change this. In 1979 a conference on unmarried motherhood was organised by Peter Birch, Bishop of Ossory. Present at the conference were a number of Catholic representative however, no unmarried mothers themselves were invited. Representative from Protestant congregations were invited but did not attend. Questions were raised as to whether Mother and Baby Institutions were sufficient to meet the modern need of the unmarried mothers and suggested changes in assistance were put forward.<sup>26</sup> Cecil Barrett, Chairman of the Central Council of the Catholic Adoption Societies, was critical. He stated ‘it would be a serious matter if ... the voluntary services provided by the Church in this country were to be handed over to or taken over by a non-denominational body, which could not be controlled by the Church.’<sup>27</sup> In 1977, the Catholic Church founded ‘Cura,’ a Catholic Church Crisis Pregnancy service, funded by the State. The Church were anxious of losing control over social assistance for unmarried mothers. As Mary Daly suggests, the focus on ‘maternal’ feminist activism in the early 1970s, allowed the Church to support unmarried motherhood as an alternative to abortion.<sup>28</sup> Clergy often referred women to Cherish, and the organisation held close links with the Catholic Church. In 1971, Bishop Éamonn Casey, became the patron of Cherish. At a seminar on *Helping the Unmarried Parent and Child* in Limerick on 2 November 1975, Casey praised the work of Cherish:

Since the right of an unborn child are paramount particularly in a Christian community ... we seek to win support for the mother who is courageous enough to welcome her baby into the world.<sup>29</sup>

Casey insinuated that women should be encouraged to keep their children rather than avail of abortion. His patronage suggests that there was a belief among some members of the clergy that they needed to move away from the stigmatisation of unmarried motherhood. Casey admitted:

The Church, regrettably, in the past may have sometimes given the impression that it was necessary to show public disapproval [of the unmarried mother] ... but it is now the duty of the Church, its priests and its teachers to do everything in their power to break down this last fortress of non-acceptance within the home.<sup>30</sup>

Bishop Casey was a strong advocate for the organisation. He donated money regularly and in some dioceses, parish collections were made in aid of Cherish.<sup>31</sup> In addition,

the affiliation with the Church may have given the group more legitimacy when challenging the state on legislative and social welfare issues. Although Cherish had the backing of a number of Bishops and priests around the country, Archbishop of Dublin Dermot Ryan stated that 'one must deplore and resist the tendency to glamorise the so-called "one parent family".'<sup>32</sup> In an article in the *Irish Independent*, the Archbishop stated in that:

People should demonstrate an active social conscience through self-respect and self-restraint. By not engaging in sexual intercourse they make a more effective contribution to social welfare than by later appealing for aid for child born out of wedlock... many need to be reminded that they must behave responsibly in the matter of sex if they are not later to be confronted with pressures tempting them to look for a solution in abortion. With it their trouble will be multiplied.<sup>33</sup>

Cherish responded to his statement arguing that forty per cent of single mothers were working and were not in fact a burden on the State.<sup>34</sup> Cherish arranged a meeting with the Archbishop and were not shy about challenging his statements publicly.

In the early years of Cherish, there was a sense of community sharing and the organisation ran solely on donations. Buy and sell fundraisers, flag days, bake sales and dinner dance balls were some of the ways in which the organisation survived. Cherish received letters from unmarried mothers requesting help and those offering help such as donating baby clothes, cots, prams and offering babysitting. Meetings for single mothers were held in Dublin weekly, with an average attendance of twenty in 1975.<sup>35</sup> The meetings provided tremendous support and an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and information. According Cherish:

The strength of Cherish lies in the fact that it is run by single parents for single parents, is a self-help, self-interested group. It cares about the problems that face single parents because these problems have been or will be experienced by every member of Cherish.<sup>36</sup>

Issues of prejudice and stigmatisation towards unmarried motherhood were also brought to the group. One woman wrote to Cherish in 1975 stating that the priest in the local parish in Cobh, County Cork would only do baptism for children of unmarried parents at night.<sup>37</sup> Similar stories were also recorded elsewhere around the country.

Cherish continued to grow and expand as an organisation throughout the 1970s. They started to receive State funding and in April 1975, Cherish moved from Maura's house to an office on Pembroke Street.<sup>38</sup> They employed a social worker and the office provided information on the implications and realities of a pregnancy outside marriage, adoption and single parenthood. Free drop-in meetings were held on nutrition, child development, childhood illnesses, knitting, preparing for Christmas/budgeting, adolescent children, self-awareness, cooking, craft skills and parenting skills. Crèche facilities were provided during all meetings. In September 1975, a second social worker was appointed. According to those in Cherish:

There is a motivation within Cherish that is unique to a social work agency. The professionals do not know best. They do not really know what it is like to be homeless with a small dependent child, to go without food, to be continuously cold in winter, to be dependent on hand-outs for existence, to be denied access to basic information, in all, to be a second-class citizen.<sup>39</sup>

From January to December 1975, 268 new clients were counselled by the Cherish social workers. 215 girls were seen in the office and fifty-three girls were advised by letter. Forty-eight per cent of the girls who received counselling either in the office or by correspondence were pregnant at the time of their initial contact. Twenty-eight per cent had children under six-months. Seven per cent had children aged between six-months and one year, and seventeen per cent had children over one year.<sup>40</sup> Over the year, an average of six new clients a week received counselling.<sup>41</sup> In 1977, approximately twenty-two persons a week called to the office and some sixty-seven phone calls were received per week.<sup>42</sup> During the period January 1978 to June 1979, nearly 7000 contacts were made with the office either seeking help from Cherish or offering help or practical assistance, such as furniture, clothing and finding employment.<sup>43</sup>

In 1976 and 1977 Cherish received a grant of £565 per year from Department of Local Government.<sup>44</sup> They received some other small grants from the Eastern Health Board and Dublin Corporation in 1976 and 1977. By 1977, Cherish had four full-time staff including a coordinator/social worker, second social worker, administrator and receptionist.<sup>45</sup> Despite funding, the year 1977 ended in a deficit of £3831 and according to the records, Cherish stated that 'our financial situation is a continuing anxiety. At least one third of our time is spent in fundraising of some sort.'<sup>46</sup> Begging letters were sent to large companies for donations. Details of loans and large deficits in 1976 and 1977 reveal how challenging the work must have been. In 1977, Cherish had an overdraft of £17,000.<sup>47</sup> In December 1977, Women's Aid gave Cherish a loan of £1000<sup>48</sup>; an example of how women's organisations helped one another. In 1978, activists took a thousand names and addresses from the telephone directories and wrote a brief letter asking the person to collect £25 for Cherish.<sup>49</sup> In 1980, the Eastern Health Board paid seventy per cent of social workers salaries however, the number of social workers employed had to be reduced from four to three.<sup>50</sup> In 1982, the Department of Health paid £10,000 to help with financial problems.<sup>51</sup> Although the organisation was continually underfunded, it continued its support services for women and lobbying for legislative change.

## **Unmarried mothers allowance**

The first priority for Cherish was the introduction of an unmarried mothers' allowance. Cherish met with numerous government ministers and met with Taoiseach Jack Lynch in 1972 to lobby for an allowance. On 16 May 1973, the Social Welfare Act 1973 introduced a payment of £8.15 a week. Later that year, Cherish published an information leaflet on how to apply for it and the Social Welfare Act 1974 allowed for children's allowance to be paid to mothers for the first time. Evelyn Ford, an activist in Cherish, said, 'I couldn't understand how people actually survived on the allowance.'<sup>52</sup> The allowance was not nearly enough to live on. When Evelyn became pregnant, she was in a good job in which she could support both herself and her child. She said, 'I worked with guys and I was on equal pay, so I knew they were keeping wives and children, paying a mortgage, that I could do the same thing.'<sup>53</sup> Not every woman had the same opportunity and many unmarried mothers faced huge financial struggles in keeping their children. In 1975, Cherish wrote a letter to the Minister demanding an increase in the unmarried mothers' allowance and an end to means testing of the allowance:

Under Article 41.2.2 of the Constitution, the State pledges itself to 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. For this reason ... we strongly urge that a sum of money sufficient for the needs of the mother who is engaged in rearing the new generation be made available, without means testing or other poor law investigations to all one parent families so that the mothers need not go out to work though economic necessity.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside the letter they enclosed a list of basic grocery items such as bread, butter, sugar and calculated the average cost to £11.99. Below the list of grocery items is inserted PLUS rent, light, clothing Mother and Child.<sup>55</sup> This clearly showed that it was not possible for a mother and child to survive on the allowance and they continued to lobby for its increase. According to Dr Mary Henry:

The main thing is trying to get them economically viable because they cannot stay on social welfare with their child all their life, end of conversation ... And the single mothers, within five years of having had a child only 12% are on social welfare, which is pretty good. So most of them are very well motivated to get on courses and so forth and we want to give them moral support.<sup>56</sup>

In 1977, Cherish stated that 'existing benefits are totally unrealistic. Children's allowance does not even meet the cost of a pint of milk a day.'<sup>57</sup> They argued that 'action was also needed in the amount of maintenance granted, the sum of £5 was ludicrous in today's terms.'<sup>58</sup> Despite increases in the allowance, many unmarried mothers were still living in poverty. In 1977, one social worker asked:

What assistance do you offer to a single mother and child who call to the office on Tuesday because they have spent their £21 for that week and won't get another £21 until Thursday? You can send them to the Community Welfare Officer, but exceptional payments or benefits in kind are difficult to obtain and rarely available in an emergency, and his function anyhow is not to regularly subsidise benefits. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul or some other overburdened voluntary body, can be approached, you can tell the family that they are inadequate because they cannot cope on £21 and give them lessons in budgeting, or you can put the onus back to the Minister of Social Welfare where it really belongs.<sup>59</sup>

Cherish noted that a significant amount of social work time was occupied in presenting client's needs to the officials of the Department of Social Welfare and to Home Assistance Officers.<sup>60</sup> Cherish relied on solicitors to volunteer legal advice on affiliation orders or maintenance agreements. In 1977, the social workers reported noted:

We continue to be appalled by the dearth of information Cherish members possess concerning their legal rights. Problems arise in the area of employment, social welfare, landlord/tenant disputes, adoption, custody, registration, and paternal rights and affiliation and maintenance ... It is totally unacceptable however that access to legal advice and aid should depend on contact with Cherish and the generosity of some few individuals. It is imperative that the Government implement an adequate scheme of Civil Legal Aid as a matter of the utmost urgency.<sup>61</sup>

Evelyn Ford stated that in 1975, 'the most maintenance you could get was a fiver a week. That was the cap on the maintenance ... I did get this solicitor ... I got the pricey sum of £3 a week. It didn't come very often and stopped eventually ... It was all hassle and stress.'<sup>62</sup> Even when maintenance orders were granted, there was no guarantee of payment. The time limit during which a mother may bring an affiliation proceeding



against the father of her child was six months. In 1977, Cherish demanded that the time-frame be extended to three years and pushed for maintenance to continue until the child had finished full-time education (rather the age of sixteen). In a letter from Senator Mary Robinson, she stated:

I have now prepared the text of a Bill removing the six months' time limit for affiliation orders. You have suggested the possibility of a new limit of three years ... Rather than introduce a new—slightly more liberal—limit of three years here, I have decided to introduce a Bill which removes the time limit entirely and will allow the single mother to bring action whenever she feels it is appropriate.<sup>63</sup>

Cherish had hoped that the Family Law Maintenance of Spouses and Children Act 1976 would be instrumental in assisting many more single mothers to take affiliation proceedings. They argued that this was not the case 'and we continue to be concerned at the appalling lack of knowledge among persons in contact with Cherish about their legal rights.'<sup>64</sup> Cherish reported that 'the percentage of men who have been supportive and responsible single fathers of their children is in the minority.'<sup>65</sup> Cherish stated that:

The Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 should be amended so that an unmarried father may no longer have an automatic right to apply for the custody of his children. The act should be amended so that he may apply to the court for guardianship.<sup>66</sup>

It was feared that, automatic guardianship for the unmarried father could led to potential custody disputes. This caused anxiety particularly in cases where the woman was raped. Between 1937 and 1977, there were at least 14 court cases reported in newspapers where one parent took custody the child from without consent of the other.<sup>67</sup> Of these, all cases involved the mother seeking legal custody of her children. Cherish succeeded in having the legislation amended.

### **Accommodation for unmarried mothers**

Accommodation proved to be the most urgent problem for unmarried mothers. Mother and Baby Institutions were still in operation, but Cherish made efforts to find private accommodation for women. It was noted that landlords generally did not welcome children. Maura Richards stated that, 'looking for a place with a baby in Dublin. Impossible ... I drove all around Dublin and I drove and I drove and I drove around Dublin trying to think.'<sup>68</sup> She rented a caravan where she raised her daughter until she managed to get a mortgage. Evelyn Ford said that she was living with friends and 'two of them couldn't move out fast enough' when they found out she was pregnant 'in case they would be tarnished, living with someone that had sex outside marriage. And you know that was shattering.'<sup>69</sup> In 1975, Cherish wrote to a large number of landlords in the Dublin area seeking co-operation from them in the housing of single parents.<sup>70</sup> The Pembroke office was turned into a bedsit for a small number of unmarried mothers with their children. In May 1975, Cherish acquired a large house awaiting demolition on the Naas Road which was loaned to them by Shelter Referral. The aim was to provide temporary accommodation for mothers and babies. 'It was anticipated that the house would provide an opportunity for mothers coming directly from hospital with newly born babies to consider the future in a supportive and unpressurised environment and to provide accommodation for crisis situations.'<sup>71</sup> Rent was £4 a week including light and

heating. Under the terms of agreement at Naas Road accommodation, 'it will be absolutely forbidden for a male friend to stay overnight should this happen the girl involved will be instantly put out.'<sup>72</sup> Between August and December 1975, thirteen girls and babies were housed in the Naas Road house.<sup>73</sup> It housed 32 girls and 24 children during 1976, and the average length of stay was eight to twelve weeks. The Naas road accommodation closed in 1980.

Cherish also sourced and subsidised private accommodation for women. They found a flat for a woman which was £6 a week and subsidised £3 of this. In June 1975, they secured accommodation for a single mother with 'an extensive and complex' psychiatric history and guaranteed rent for her until the end of the year.<sup>74</sup> Five girls who contacted Cherish during 1975 were re-housed by Inter-Aid, and eight girls were put in direct contact with accommodation by Cherish throughout the year. Twenty-four girls were placed in a family situation both before and after the birth of their children.<sup>75</sup> Eighteen girls were referred to mother and baby institutions for accommodation and to adoption agencies for advice.<sup>76</sup> In 1977, one in twenty of all contacts made with Cherish specifically sought help with accommodation.<sup>77</sup> Cherish noted that rent prices were rising regularly and rapidly which was particularly difficult for unmarried mothers.

In addition, Cherish advocated for children of unmarried mothers who were denied the right to land and family succession because of their status of 'illegitimacy.' In 1977, Cherish circulated a letter in all national newspapers and to all councillors calling on for the status of illegitimacy to be abolished. They argued that discrimination against children born outside of marriage in relation to their rights of succession should be ended.<sup>78</sup> Their efforts eventually resulted in the abolishment of illegitimacy under the Illegitimacy Act 1978.

## Abortion

There was major divide in the women's movement in Ireland on the issue of abortion.<sup>79</sup> According to Jenny Beale, in 1980, there was only one organisation, The Women's Right to Choose Group which advocated for abortion legislation therefore, 'the lack of campaign meant anti-choice rhetoric rang through.'<sup>80</sup> As pro-choice activist Mary Gordon argued, in 1979, 'few believed that abortion could be campaigned for, as the conservative Catholic nature of Irish society meant that there was massive ideological opposition to the principle of women controlling their own fertility.'<sup>81</sup> In addition, 'the problem of unwanted pregnancies simply did not impinge on most people's consciousness as Irish women went to England in secrecy in order to continue with or terminate pregnancies. Thus, by escaping the brutal facts of backstreet abortion, Ireland was able to ignore the existence of these problems altogether.'<sup>82</sup> As the decade progressed, abortion became more common than adoption. Lindsey Earner-Byrne argues that Irish girls who would have travelled to England in search of anonymous adoption, were now seeking abortion.<sup>83</sup> From the late 1970s, more women were contracting Cherish seeking information on abortion. From October to December 1975, Cherish received seven enquiries explicitly requesting abortion.<sup>84</sup> They stated:

Again and again concern is expressed about the rising abortion figures and the number of single mothers who place their children for adoption having kept them for some time ...

Irish society has a long way to go before a single pregnant woman can say she placed her child for adoption because she wished to do so not because there was nowhere to live, benefits were inadequate, legal discrimination weighed against her child and day care provisions were virtually non-existent.<sup>85</sup>

Cherish noted that in 1977 nearly eight per cent of pregnant women contacting the social workers requested abortion advice, stating that they were 'somewhat alarmed by this incidence rate.'<sup>86</sup> In 1977, five per cent of people called to the office requested advice specifically about abortion (in total twenty-six called personally and thirty-seven enquired over the phone).<sup>87</sup> In addition, Cherish became concerned with the number of unmarried mothers with more than one child.<sup>88</sup> In 1975, twenty-three women, approximately ten per cent of the total, had second or subsequent pregnancies.<sup>89</sup> There were nineteen known second pregnancies among new clients in 1975 and two clients with three or more pregnancies.<sup>90</sup> They stated that:

This figure is far too high and is indicative perhaps of a failure by the helping professions to realise that an individual's sexual pattern does not often change radically after the birth of a child. 'Never again' is not just a reality situation and assistance and support are much less forthcoming for an unplanned second pregnancy.<sup>91</sup>

There was judgement from the organisation towards women who had more than one pregnancy outside of marriage. Although the numbers appear to have been small, the group were particularly anxious by the rate of its increase.

There were diverse perspectives among committee members of Cherish on the issue of abortion. While the aim of the organisation was to support the woman in keeping her child, if it proved impossible to find a situation where she could keep her child, then information on adoption was provided. Women planning to travel to Britain to were discouraged from doing so. In 1975, one social worker noted:

We are pleased to note that twelve girls who contacted us returned to Ireland for the remainder of their pregnancy or to establish their home here with their children. To our knowledge, only three girls left Ireland who had made initial contact with us.<sup>92</sup>

Some committee members believed abortion was 'a difficult solution to a difficult problem.'<sup>93</sup> The committee stated that:

Everyone involved in Cherish on a day-to-day basis understands why some women choose to have abortions. Few people in our society would deny a mother her choice but very few people are prepared to make her choice a real one.<sup>94</sup>

The founder of the organisation Maura Richards, did not want Cherish to become an information group for those seeking abortion. In her monograph, she stated, 'the argument in Cherish was whether or not we should have a list of abortion agencies in England and be able to give information. I was adamant that this could not happen. We had set ourselves up for the purpose of helping women keep their children.'<sup>95</sup> In addition, their support from the Catholic Church would have been jeopardised if they were known to provide information on abortion services. Nevertheless, in 1978, Cherish concluded that any women seeking information on abortion would be re-directed to the Well Women's Centre or Open Line Counselling who provided information on abortion in Britain.<sup>96</sup>

The issue of providing abortion information re-emerged in 1988 when legal challenges were brought against the two helplines which provided information on abortion travel, Open Line Counselling Services and Well Woman Centre.<sup>97</sup> In September 1988, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) brought forward a legal challenge arguing that the information provided by the helplines was in breach of the Eighth Amendment. Cherish needed to decide if they wanted to continue re-directing women for abortion information. They noted that the Rape Crisis Centre were not providing information on abortion. At a committee meeting on 14 November 1988, Cherish established three options. The first was to 'continue giving information and say nothing publicly' however, 'this immediately raises the question of do we then make direct referrals?'<sup>98</sup> Cherish were concerned although it may not be public knowledge that they provided referral, if they continue to do so it may become known and they may also face legal challenges:

Even if we did not declare this publicly, it would only be a matter of time until it became generally known which would leave us open to court proceedings and injunction since we would be committing an act of civil disobedience, and might possibly result in imprisonment.<sup>99</sup>

The second option was to 'act within the law which apparently means not discussing option of termination and certainly not giving information.'<sup>100</sup> Cherish believed this option was too restrictive as it raised 'questions about where we stand in relation to the right to information, and the kind of service we offer to people in terms of enabling good decision-making.'<sup>101</sup> The third option was to 'act within the law by not giving information directly, but publicly deplore the judgement and its effects.'<sup>102</sup> Although some believed that this would be 'a logical continuation of our involvement in the Anti-Amendment Campaign, and would no doubt expose us to the same kind of slurs about our pro-abortion stance.'<sup>103</sup> In the end, Cherish did publicly support to the 'Defend the Clinics Campaign,' the campaign which opposed from the legal challenge. They decided to continue quietly directing women to other organisations which provided abortion information. Cherish became later a member of the Coalition for Freedom and Women's Lives (Frontline) which called for freedom of information on abortion services, legislative protection of the right to travel abroad for abortion and a national programme of action to reduce unplanned pregnancies.<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

By the 1980s the number of clients advised by Cherish fell. In 1979, one social worker stated that the decrease in numbers 'may reflect firstly, an increased acceptance of unmarried parenthood in our society, and secondly, a growing awareness of, and easier access, to the services that are in existence which may be of help in the community at large.'<sup>105</sup> Throughout the 1970s, Cherish developed from a grassroots lobby group to an established organisation working with solicitors to offer legal advice, employing a number of social workers, and by making various homes available for the accommodation of unmarried mothers in Dublin. Although Cherish held ties with the Catholic Church in the early years of the organisation, this did not limit their decision-making capabilities on abortion in the 1980s. Likewise, their receipt of government funding

did not restrict their lobbying efforts. Their achievement in securing an unmarried mothers' allowance and their constant pressure for its increase is highly commendable. Gingerbread, an organisation originally founded in London in 1970, advocated for one-parent families, usually as a result of marital breakdown. It was founded in Dublin in 1978 and merged with Cherish in 2009 to become 'One Family' which continues to this day. Overall, Cherish played a key role in the advocacy of unmarried mothers and continues to do so under the name 'One Family.'

## Notes

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Lorraine Grimes* is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Social Science Institute at Maynooth University on the project 'Digital Preservation of Reproductive Health Resources: Archiving the Eighth.' One of the collections archived as part of this project are interviews carried out by Professor Linda Connolly and used throughout this article. Lorraine's PhD thesis titled 'Migration and Assistance: Irish Unmarried Mothers in Britain 1926-1973,' examines the institutionalisation of Irish unmarried mothers in Mother and Baby institutions in Britain, and explores issues of adoption, repatriation and socio-economic class. Lorraine has worked on a number of projects including a WHO funded project on the implementation of abortion policy in Ireland. Lorraine was also lead author of the report 'Too Many Barriers: Experiences of Abortion in Ireland after Repeal.'

## ORCID

*Lorraine Grimes*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3678-7621>