

Time to acknowledge and address decades of racism

Tuesday, March 13, 2018 - 12:00 AM

During the last few decades there has been acknowledgement of how unmarried mothers and their children who were placed in the care of the state were mistreated and sometimes abused within Church-run institutions, **writes Bryan Fanning, Professor of Migration and Social Policy at University College Dublin.**

To a considerable extent this abuse was made possible by the stigma then attached to sex outside marriage. Efforts to hide unwanted women and their children away from society created a climate in which abuse could take place and be covered up.

Some women whose children were placed in care had relationships with African men, some of whom came to Ireland as medical students.

The children born of relationships between African men and Irish women experienced not just the stigma experienced by other unmarried mothers but also extreme racism.

Christine Buckley was born in London in October 1946, the daughter of a 31 year-old Irish widow from Dublin and a 20 year-old Nigerian medical student, who were in a long-term relationship with each other.



Christine Buckley, who died in 2014, did much to expose institutional abuse, and campaigned for the establishment of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and the Residential Institutions Redress Board. Picture: James Horan/Photocall Ireland

As a three-week old baby she was given up for fostering and in 1950 she was sent to St. Vincent's Industrial School in Goldenbridge, an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin. In a TV documentary about her experiences Christine described a regime in which children were dehumanised – they were referred to by a number rather than by their names (her given number was eighty nine) - and received sadistic punishments.

On one occasion a nun poured boiling water on her leg. On another she received a beating so severe she required more than eighty stitches. In addition to the well-documented abuse suffered by children in such institutions many mixed-race children experienced further abuse because of the colour of their skin.

Christine Buckley was one of only a handful of “orphans” to complete her secondary school education and receive Leaving certificate in local separate Mercy Secondary School known to some former inmates as ‘the outside school’, set apart from Industrial school at Goldenbridge.

She trained as a nurse and during the 1980s she traced her biological parents. Christine came to national prominence in 1996 when RTE broadcast Dear Daughter, the documentary directed by Louis Lentin about the physical and emotional abuse experienced by Christine and other children.

The programme's title was taken from the opening words of a letter from her African father, Dr. Ariwodo Kalunta, after she traced him.

Christine campaigned for the establishment of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and the Residential Institutions Redress Board. She stood as an independent candidate in the 1997 Dail elections. In 1999 she founded an education and support centre for former residents of industrial schools.

Her activism, and the attention garnered by Dear Daughter, were seminal in bringing to light the institutional abuse of both white Irish and mixed-race children in care in Ireland. However, Christine Buckley was just one of a number of disavowed ‘mixed race Irish’ children who experienced institutional abuse.

Rosemary Adaser was one of at least seventy African Irish children placed in care in Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s. Her mother worked as a telephonist in the Rotunda maternity hospital in Dublin. Her father was a Ghanaian doctor who had also worked there.

Rosemary was placed as an infant in a mother and baby home and like other African Irish babies she was never offered up for adoption. She has described experiences of racist abuse from those supposed to care for her and from other children also.

Rosemary described having pots of urine and excrement emptied on her by other children, being made unblock toilets with her hands because her skin was black already and being ‘always’, she

recalled, 'the last child to bathe in the same bath water preceded by thirty other girls for fear my black skin would contaminate the white girls.'

Nuns told her that no man would ever want her because she was black. However, at the age of sixteen she became pregnant and her baby was taken from her soon after he was born. She emigrated to England when she was twenty. During the 1980s she traced her mother.

Rosemary Adaser subsequently founded an organisation, the Association of Mixed-Race Irish (AMRI), which has campaigned for acknowledgement of the racism that children like her experienced.

During the last few decades Ireland has seen large-scale immigration.

My book *Migration and the Making of Ireland* is an attempt to understand this by focusing on the experiences of those who have settled here across the centuries.

There is, I think, much to learn from the experiences of past generations of migrants and their families that can help us understand the challenges facing the Ireland of today. One of these lessons is that it is difficult to make progress unless the racism and injustice experienced by some is acknowledged and addressed.

Bryan Fanning is Professor of Migration and Social Policy at UCD

** This story was subject to amendment on March 16, 2018*