

Chapter 8

Everyday life experiences of female witnesses in Schools

- 8.01** This chapter summarises the information provided by the 378 female witnesses about their experience of education, work, health, recreation and other aspects of everyday life in Schools over a period of 74 years between 1914 and 1988. All the Schools referred to by female witnesses were managed by religious Sisters.
- 8.02** There were many consistencies in the reports heard by the Committee from female witnesses in relation to all the Schools. Witnesses reported living in large unheated buildings with communal dormitories and poor hygiene facilities, as part of a strictly controlled regime that allowed little time for recreation and was largely isolated from the outside world, including their family. Witnesses reported their time was occupied between work, school and recreation with varying emphasis on each in different Schools and over different periods of time.
- 8.03** In relation to admissions prior to the 1970s, the most common features reported by witnesses were descriptions of the daily routine, including an early morning call by bell for Mass followed by breakfast in a communal refectory. Meals were routinely provided in large refectories at fixed times, the main meal being in the middle of the day and a light meal provided at approximately 5.30pm. Witnesses went to bed at various times between 6pm and 9pm, with more flexibility in recent years.
- 8.04** Clothing and footwear was reported by many witnesses to have been of inferior quality and generally distributed from a stock of donated second-hand items that were kept in a central clothing store. Reports regarding clothing and personal care varied between Schools over different periods of time. A number of Schools employed someone to make and mend clothing. In other Schools older residents and lay staff were reported to have made the clothes and taught the younger residents how to do so. Many witnesses reported knitting jumpers and socks for themselves and co-residents. Many witnesses reported that they never owned a new pair of shoes. There were a few reports of winter coats being provided on an individual basis but more commonly that they were shared for use as needed. Witnesses discharged during the 1970s and 1980s reported being more often allowed to select their own clothes and no longer having to share clothing and footwear.
- 8.05** Personal hygiene was attended to using shared facilities with little or no toiletries or sanitary protection said to be provided in the majority of Schools in the period before the 1970s. Witnesses reported increased provision and availability of hot water, soap, towels, toothbrushes, sanitary towels, toilet paper, combs and hairbrushes in later years. Since the mid-1970s, accommodation was reported to have improved with residents moving to smaller units, either adapted or purpose built, with modern facilities. These units catered for smaller groups of children with trained care staff in some Schools in the late 1970s and 1980s. Other changes reported included attending primary and second-level school and other activities outside the institution.

- 8.06** A consistent feature reported in most Schools prior to the 1970s was the code of silence that was enforced during many activities, particularly while working, in the dormitories and during mealtimes.

Work

- 8.07** The Committee heard evidence from 337 female witnesses of being involved in work and physical labour during their time as residents in the Schools. Work was described as graded according to age and it was reported that residents from some Schools were expected to work from the age of seven years. A small number of witnesses reported that they started working at five years of age. Most witnesses spoke about the lack of staff available to do domestic work and of the priority given to the completion of allocated work to the exclusion of education or play, as one witness said: *'We cared for them, they did not care for us'*. The work described by witnesses included domestic tasks in the Schools, kitchens, convents, local presbyteries, the homes of local families, and on adjoining farmyards. Work of a commercial nature including laundry, Rosary bead and rug making, embroidery, and knitting were also described. Many witnesses reported that residents received no payment for this work.
- 8.08** Work in some Schools was described as beginning before breakfast and continuing until class commenced, to be resumed after school. General cleaning chores such as sweeping, scrubbing and polishing were reported as work tasks by 337 witnesses. Residents were responsible for their own bed making and dormitory cleaning, in addition to cleaning and polishing corridors, staircases, chapels, classrooms and associated convents, and other buildings. Witnesses reported being made to clean or polish the same area a number of times until the desired standard was reached. Witnesses reported that in nine Schools the residents were also required to clean or work in the kitchen of an affiliated boarding school, hospital or nursing home.
- 8.09** One hundred and forty seven (147) witnesses reported working in laundries both for the institutions and convents, and on a commercial basis for external institutions including hospitals, hotels, boarding schools and people from the local town. Many gave accounts of receiving no payment for the work. Witnesses reported having to wash, starch and iron nuns' habits, clerical vestments and altar linen, sheets, shirts and table linen. The work in the washrooms and laundries was described as laborious, without the aid of washing machines or other equipment in the period prior to the 1960s. Witnesses recalled standing on boxes as small children to reach into laundry troughs and washing nun's sanitary cloths in cold water with bare hands.
- 8.10** It was the practice in most of the girls Industrial Schools to accept admissions of female infants, and a number of Schools also admitted male infants. The work of providing care for these children was reported to be mainly undertaken by the residents. The ongoing care of babies and very young children, including siblings, was reported by 123 witnesses. This work included feeding, dressing, washing and toileting the children who were often referred to by witnesses as their 'charges'. Witnesses reported that in a number of Schools they shared their beds with their young 'charges'. Other witnesses were required to get up at night to feed babies who slept in cots beside their beds. Many witnesses described the overwhelming nature of the childcare task, including eight witnesses who described having to assist toddlers with rectal prolapse.
- I distinctly remember the babies would be on potties for a long time and sometimes the older children would lift them up and with a cloth push this thing ...(rectal prolapse).... I didn't know what was going on at the time.*
- 8.11** Witnesses reported that there was little or no adult supervision as they performed their childcare tasks. A number of witnesses described the difficulty they experienced caring for young children without the benefit of being well cared for themselves. As a consequence some witnesses acknowledged that at times they treated their young 'charges' harshly. A small number of

witnesses stated that they were so hungry that they helped themselves to food provided for the babies, replacing milk with water in the babies' bottles.

- 8.12** Most Schools and convents had residents assigned to answer the doorbell and do other jobs similar to those of a parlour maid. Twenty four (24) witnesses reported being sent as housekeepers to local clergy and families, 13 witnesses reported receiving payment for this work and others reported that they believed payment went directly to the religious congregation.
- 8.13** Kitchen duties and work in the attached bakeries were reported by 121 witnesses. Descriptions of this work in 14 Schools included: washing dishes and pots, scrubbing floors, foraging for firewood, lighting and stoking fires, lifting large pots of boiling water and peeling large quantities of potatoes and other vegetables. Many of the witnesses reported that this work provided access to extra food and warmth, it also involved long hours and was arduous. Work in staff kitchens was seen as particularly advantageous as there was access to better quality food. Some Schools had both commercial and domestic bakeries where residents worked, and in some instances continued on a full-time basis on completion of their education.
- 8.14** Commercial contract work was described as a significant activity in four Schools by 84 witnesses and included piece work in the form of making Rosary beads, scapulars and other religious items. In one School it was reported that young residents made novenas for which it was believed financial donations were received by the School. The majority of witnesses stated that no payment was received for this work.
- 8.15** Working in the farmyard, fields, gardens and on the bogs were described as routine activities in both urban and rural Schools. While it was reported that the female religious congregations generally employed lay male ancillary staff to work on their farms, 97 witnesses reported being involved in farm work including haymaking, saving turf, churning butter, sowing and picking potatoes, milking cows and feeding animals. Weeding gravel driveways, convent graveyards and plucking the convent lawns by hand were other outdoor tasks reported by witnesses from several Schools.
- 8.16** Witnesses reported what they regarded as unsafe practices related to cleaning and fire lighting in five different Schools. In two Schools residents had to clean high external windows with one resident holding the ankles of another resident who was cleaning the windows. Five (5) Schools were reported as having residents light fires and furnaces in the early hours of the morning for the School heating, laundry and cooking systems. Carrying turf and coal and keeping the furnaces fired was part of the work described by witnesses.
- 8.17** Thirty two (32) witnesses described a distinction being made in the work allocated to residents who had families and those regarded as 'orphans' who described themselves as at times allocated particularly unpleasant tasks such as clearing drains and unblocking and cleaning toilets. Other witnesses said they observed 'orphans' frequently undertaking demeaning tasks.
- 8.18** Sewing, knitting and decorative needlework were regular semi-recreational activities; several witnesses reported making clerical vestments, as well as socks, jumpers, dresses and school uniforms for co-residents. Specialised needlework and knitting was also undertaken for what witnesses understood was the commercial market and a number of witnesses reported being regularly occupied knitting Aran sweaters, making rugs, embroidering tablecloths, vestments and other cloths for shops and church use.

They used to have these huge tablecloths and I used to have to do embroidery on it and do the designs, I used do the crochet. I used do the vestments, the nuns used give them as gifts to the priests. I used to have to do all the sewing for the girls plus all the knitting during the school's holidays. Remember I was 14 years old at the time.

8.19 Witnesses reported that mending clothes was a regular occupation in 16 Schools, others gave accounts of lay staff being employed in sewing rooms. In five Schools it was reported that residents darned socks and jumpers for local boys' Industrial Schools and fee-paying boarding schools.

8.20 Other assigned tasks included residents both making and 'teasing' their own mattresses. Mattress teasing was reported as a regular summer activity by 18 witnesses from five Schools. This was described as hard and unpleasant work, 'teasing and re-stuffing the mattresses was our summer holiday'.

8.21 The following account of a typical day was given in evidence by a witness who reported she was removed from the classroom at the age of 12 years to work full-time in the Industrial School:

There was no electricity in the laundry and it was steam mechanised. Myself and ...named 2 co-residents... were told we had to work from Monday morning. Three of us, we used to have to go down and light the furnace that heated the whole school part. On Monday we got up at 6 o'clock in the morning, we lit the fire, then 3 of us took it in turn to keep shovelling the coal in to keep the steam up in order that the machinery in the laundry ... would keep going. On the Tuesday we had the ironing to do ... we had ...(a large number of)... nuns in the convent and we had to do their ironing and the white things had to be starched. I had to get up at 7 o'clock and there was a round boiler thing. We, 3 of us had to light that and as soon as it got red hot you put the old fashioned irons around it, between 20 and 30 irons. The older girls, there were 8 senior girls, were given the job of ironing all the white things for the nuns. On Wednesday that was the baking day.... On Thursday we would go out and weed the garden ... or ... in summer if there was turf coming in, the lorry would just leave the turf there and the nun would come in and say "you, you and you go out and throw in that turf." On Thursday the 3 of us used to have to go down and clean that big boiler out, clean the ashes and set it again for Friday and the laundry. On Saturday then we would do odd jobs, go over to the convent and did "blocks" ... polish the floors with these big block things to get up a shine on them.

8.22 Witnesses reported changes in relation to work practices in the later years covered by this Report. The commercial contract work and the practice of residents undertaking work external to the School was no longer routine. However, three witnesses reported caring for babies and young children in the 1970s and 1980s and that the practice of doing household chores continued.

Food

8.23 The inadequate provision of food was widely reported by witnesses. The standard diet described by witnesses for the years prior to the 1970s was porridge, bread and dripping and tea or cocoa for breakfast. The main meal was consistently reported to be of boiled potatoes with vegetables and on occasion some meat or fish. The evening meal was most often described as bread and jam and tea or cocoa. Witnesses reported that there was little or no access to extra food except what might have been obtained opportunistically by residents working in kitchens and elsewhere.

The nuns' bins would be lovely, you would eat the bread out of their buckets, you would get it as you were walking along the path in the garden going down to the work in the fields, you'd pick out the bread.

- 8.24** Varying accounts were given of both the quantity and quality of the food provided with noticeable improvements reported after the 1970s. Witnesses reported that in more recent years sausages, chips, vegetables, eggs, cheese, fish fingers, cornflakes and milk puddings became part of the regular diet.
- 8.25** Special occasions such as Christmas, Easter, First Holy Communion and saint's feast days were reported to be at times celebrated with cake and biscuits, jelly, ice cream and lemonade. Many of the convents had orchards, glass houses and kept poultry; however witnesses stated that fruit and eggs were rarely provided, with the exception of Christmas and Easter when oranges and eggs were reported as traditional treats.

Play and recreation

- 8.26** Witnesses reported that play and recreation were described as peripheral to everyday life for the Schools' residents, particularly for those discharged before the 1960s. Toys, books and play equipment were largely non-existent in most of the Schools during that period. Witnesses reported playing in fields and '*making our own fun*' and described making small dolls and balls from scraps of cloth. In a number of Schools voluntary organisations brought presents to the residents at Christmas; it was frequently reported these were locked away and never used. Fourteen (14) witnesses described having toys and books given as presents taken from them to be locked away in a toy cupboard and taken out when visitors came. In a small number of instances, witnesses believed that these toys and books were given away by the Sisters to their own relatives. The lack of any place to keep personal possessions made it difficult for residents to retain a doll, toy or book given as a gift or sent by their family. Witnesses reported that a small number of Schools provided film shows for the residents.
- 8.27** Witnesses reported that most Schools had recreation halls that were described as places to congregate in wet weather or in the wintertime, often in enforced silence. Recreation halls were also used for school concerts and plays held at Christmas and for visiting dignitaries. There were accounts from a number of Schools of residents competing in Irish dancing competitions and playing musical instruments at the Feis Cheoil. Accounts were heard also of a number of Schools having bands and/or choirs that performed at these competitions and various local events.
- 8.28** While sport was a less common feature of life in the School system for girls than it was for boys 153 witnesses reported that they played in the yard or surrounding fields in all weathers and were forced to spend long periods outdoors. Eighty (80) witnesses described the regular long Sunday walk with pairs of girls walking '*like a crocodile*' for up to 10 miles with religious staff or older residents in charge. One witness described how they spent time at recreation:
- We used to have a spinning top and put coloured things into it and we used to play hopscotch. We had basketball. There is no use telling a lie, we had a shed and we used to play among ourselves.*
- 8.29** Day trips to the seaside and swimming were reported by 47 witnesses as a treat during the summer months in particular Schools.
- A couple used come and they would take us to the seaside, take us to the beach. We used to be in this bus, we had buckets and spades, the whole lot of us went. You'd be so excited. We had plastic cups and loads of sandwiches. I remember them buying us all a ball and buckets.*
- 8.30** Witnesses from 11 Schools reported on improvements in recreation facilities during the 1960s, including the provision of swings, merry-go-rounds and slides in the play yard and board games,

skipping ropes, radios, gramophones, television and books in the recreation rooms. Further improvements were reported in the 1970s and 1980s with increased involvement in cultural, recreational and social activities including music and choirs in the local area. Visits to the cinema and in some instances activities with children of local families were also reported. Other improvements described by witnesses included the opportunity to be involved in outdoor sports, games and competitions including basketball, volleyball and tennis.

Education

8.31 Most Schools for girls had their own primary level classrooms attended solely by the residents. A small number of Schools were part of larger establishments that included primary and secondary schools attended by both children from the local area and residents from the Industrial School. Reports were also heard of local children, frequently referred to as ‘outsiders’, attending class within the Industrial School setting.

8.32 Three hundred and seventy six (376) witnesses reported attending classes at primary level for some period of their time in the Schools. The majority of witnesses, 220 (58%), reported having completed their education by 14 years of age, when most reported that they commenced working full-time in or for the institution. The following table outlines the reported school leaving age of female witnesses:

Table 30: Reported School Leaving Age – Female Industrial and Reformatory Schools

Reported school leaving age	Number of witnesses
Under 10	8
10–12	34
13–14	178
15–16	129
Over 16	22
Unavailable	5
No schooling	2
Total witnesses	378

Source: Confidential Committee of CICA, 2009

8.33 As the table indicates, two witnesses reported that they received no schooling and never attended class. Eight (8) witnesses stated that they were taken out of school to work full-time before the age of 10 years and a further 34 witnesses reported not attending school after 12 years of age. The majority of these witnesses reported that they worked in the Schools or related areas instead of attending class. One hundred and twenty nine (129) witnesses reported that they remained in school until they were 15 or 16 years old, 105 (28%) of whom attended secondary or vocational school in the local community or, in a small number of instances, attended boarding schools.

8.34 Forty one (41) of the 105 witnesses who reported receiving secondary level education were discharged from care in the 1970s and 1980s.

8.35 Some witnesses reported having done well in school and enjoyed learning but were not allowed to continue their education as they were competent domestic workers:

During the summer holiday they said “you are not going back to school”. They had me making vestments for the priests, for the first year I did not get paid, the second year they put a small bit in a post office book that they gave me and I going. I was good at maths and science I got 100 once and they said I had copied, you know they put you down, you were no one, you were no use. I loved school, when I was taken out I cried, I loved the science in the secondary I would have loved ... (loved) ... to be a nurse, I could have done better if I had done my Inter, I have a big gripe about that. They took me out because I was good at sewing they wanted me for the vestments. Others who had a mother were kept in school I had no one to say you can’t take her out. When I was 16 I wanted to be going and they said you can stay and train someone in, so I had to stay for a year and trained in another girl.

- 8.36** Many witnesses reported that their education was inadequate, particularly for those discharged before the 1970s. Changes regarding access to education and the active encouragement of religious staff to continue their education were noted by witnesses discharged in the 1970s and 1980s. A number of witnesses were supported to attend technical and secondary schools and commercial colleges and an increased number reported taking part in State examinations.

The nuns were very kind they sent me to ...named... college in the evenings to study shorthand and typing.... I still wanted to be a nurse, one nun used to encourage me and the other would say “no she is too delicate, she would never last”.... I left at 18 and went straight to England to be a nurse. The nuns helped me ... (with fare and application)....

Religion

- 8.37** Mass and Rosary were described by witnesses as standard features of daily life in the institutions. Witnesses attended Mass early in the morning, before breakfast. Some witnesses described a routine of saying three rosaries a day while kneeling on wooden or stone floors. The recitation of litanies while residents were preparing for bed was also reported. In some Schools the Rosary accompanied work tasks and witnesses reported that any slacking in responses could lead to punishment. Catechism was reported to have constituted a large segment of the educational activities in several Schools in the decades prior to the 1970s, with witnesses reporting: ‘all they cared about was religion’ and ‘we ate, slept and drank religion’.
- 8.38** Witnesses reported that the notion of the ‘devil’ as a force of evil was emphasised by the religious staff. A large number of witnesses stated that they were constantly told they were sinners as a result of their parents’ behaviour. Residents reported being prevailed upon to pray for their own and their parents’ forgiveness and be grateful for the care they were receiving.
- 8.39** The Committee heard witness accounts of religious feast days being strictly observed; Lent, the months of May and November and the feast days of the Sisters’ patron saints generally necessitated particular practices, which were both penitential and celebratory. Witnesses reported that the clergy were accorded particular respect and were attended to diligently by the staff and residents. Chapel choirs were a point of pride for some Schools especially when members of the public were in attendance.

Health and medical care

- 8.40** Three hundred and twenty five (325) witnesses described some form of healthcare provision including medical attention, inspection or immunisation for themselves or other residents in the Schools.

- 8.41** As with the male witnesses, female witnesses reported being assessed and treated for normal childhood accidental injuries and illnesses as well as non-accidental physical injuries while resident in the Schools. Table 31 describes the types of healthcare available:

Table 31: Types of Healthcare Reported – Female Industrial and Reformatory Schools

Healthcare	Number of reports
GP attendance	176
Hospital attendance	152
Infirmary available	135
Dental care	85
Medical inspection	67
Immunisation	62
Nurse available	52

Source: Confidential Committee of CICA, 2009

- 8.42** One hundred and seventy six (176) witnesses recalled the attendance of a doctor during their time as residents, which included being seen by the local doctor either in their surgery or, more commonly, in the School and the doctors' attendance at routine medical examinations in the School. Visits by medical inspectors were reported. Witnesses from one School reported the local doctor conducting a bi-monthly inspection of residents. Immunisation and the testing of residents for tuberculosis were reported as routine components of some medical inspections. In other Schools routine examinations of weight and height were the only medical attention reported. A number of witnesses reported changes to their diets and other aspects of their care following inspector's visits.
- 8.43** One hundred and fifty two (152) witnesses reported attending hospital for in-patient and out-patient treatment of conditions including: tuberculosis, gastroenteritis, appendicitis, rheumatic and other fevers, surgical treatment of ear, nose, throat and other complaints. Twenty three (23) witnesses reported being hospitalised for treatment of accidental injuries and 33 others reported receiving hospital treatment for non-accidental injuries. Witnesses reported attending hospitals and clinics for investigations both in their local area and to specialist centres. Attendance at a specialist clinic or hospital was more commonly reported after 1970, with witness reports of attending specialist appointments for eye, ear and skin ailments as well as child and adolescent mental health services.
- 8.44** One hundred and thirty five (135) witnesses described infirmaries in 18 Schools; other Schools were reported to use the dormitories as infirmaries. In most accounts infirmaries or dormitories were described as isolated, lonely places that were rarely supervised. Witnesses reported the rule of silence in the infirmary and dormitories increased the sense of isolation as did the absence of staff dedicated to the care of residents who were ill.
- 8.45** Nursing staff were employed in some Schools at different times and the presence of staff described as 'nurses' was recalled by witnesses in other Schools. Other witnesses believed that the nursing function was performed by untrained staff. Witnesses reported that unqualified staff carried out many treatments such as lancing boils, treating ringworm and other infections, lacerations and injuries without medical advice.
- 8.46** Witness accounts of dental care indicated that dentists attended regularly in some Schools and in others when requested. In most instances the reported dental treatments were extractions, with or without anaesthetic.

Inspections

- 8.47** The Committee heard 219 reports of inspectors visiting the Schools. Witnesses were not always clear which government department the inspectors represented. There were reports of government inspectors visiting the Schools who, it was believed, were primarily concerned with the condition of the physical surroundings and reports of classroom inspectors, commonly referred to as the Cigire. Witnesses believed that these inspectors were concerned with aspects of their education and did not specifically address the individual care and welfare needs of the residents. Sixty seven (67) witnesses reported the visits of medical inspectors, who conducted routine physical inspections, including evaluating height, weight, hearing and sight.
- 8.48** While witnesses reported they were generally not spoken to by the visiting inspectors, in the period prior to 1970 one inspector was mentioned by 49 witnesses, including six who specifically reported being spoken to directly: *'There was a nice woman Inspector, she would speak to us, we were coached in what to say though.'*
- 8.49** The majority of witnesses reported advanced knowledge of the forthcoming inspections and the Committee heard 123 accounts of special preparations being made, including cleaning, polishing and, in some instances, painting the School prior to the visit. Others reported being hidden during the inspectors' visits because they were bruised or injured. Witnesses from one School reported that newly renovated bathrooms were opened for inspectors' visits and were immediately relocked and not used again after they left. In another School residents were moved to a new building for the duration of the inspector's visit. Witnesses reported that special provisions were made available to residents for the period of the inspection including special clothing, extra bedding, improved food and the provision of toiletries. One hundred and sixteen (116) witnesses reported that special clothing and bedding was provided to them prior to inspections and 109 witnesses described having better and more plentiful food while the inspection lasted. *'A man walked around with 2 nuns. He did not speak to the children. Table cloths and china was put out for the visit, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste was out as well and taken back after the visit.'*
- 8.50** In the period prior to 1970 toilet paper and toiletries such as soap and toothbrushes were provided for the duration of inspections in most Schools:
- We were told to be on our best behaviour, we were all lined up, I'd be dying to say something but knew I would get into trouble. The floors were polished, new towels and bars of soap would be put out, but you couldn't touch them. When they left everything was put back.*
- 8.51** In addition to the physical preparations, 62 witnesses reported being coached and warned about how to behave and what to say to the inspectors' and that staff were present for the duration of the inspection. *'We were all done up, afraid to blink an eye, we were schooled in what to say, you knew you'd get punished.'*
- 8.52** The Committee heard witness accounts of preparations that involved rehearsing songs, poems and Irish dancing to perform for the inspectors who, apart from these appearances, were described as mainly seen at a distance, accompanied by staff. The majority of witnesses who recalled the inspections were clear that when the inspectors left all changes were reversed and life returned to the way it had been. Exceptions to this were a small number of witness reports of improvements in care and conditions following medical inspections.

Officials, dignitaries and other visitors

- 8.53** Witnesses reported that many official visitors and dignitaries visited the Schools over the years, including: a President, ministers for education, bishops and other clergy, and local or national figures. Other visitors recalled were members of charitable boards, commercial organisations, voluntary groups and others whom the witnesses could not identify. Advance preparations for such visits were reported.
- 8.54** Witnesses described visits to the Schools by members of the public who were reported to provide holiday placements for residents at weekends and during school holidays and were referred to as 'holiday' families, 'godparents' and 'foster' families. Witnesses from a number of Schools who had no known family contact, many of whom described themselves as orphans, reported being sent regularly to the homes of these families. Another category of visitor described by a small number of witnesses was prospective foster and adoptive parents who they stated visited the Schools to select a child to foster or adopt. Witnesses described being dressed for the occasion and '*paraded*' with other residents in front of these visitors hoping to be selected.
- 8.55** Witnesses stated that they were usually not spoken to by visitors and were warned against speaking to them:
- Visitors came, we always thought this was our chance to tell someone what was happening, but we never got near them, the place was lovely, food, clothes, all changed until they left.*

Arrangements for discharge

- 8.56** Witnesses who had spent most of their childhood in institutional care reported a sense of displacement and bewilderment when discharged from the Schools. Many reported that the transition from care provided an opportunity for freedom, but was also a time of disappointment and loss. Three hundred and twenty five (325) female witnesses were in residential institutions for between six and 18 years and many had only ever known life in an institution.
- 8.57** One hundred and eighty (180) witnesses reported being discharged home or to the care of older siblings and extended family. Those witnesses who had been able to maintain contact with their parents, siblings and relatives through visits and holidays during their admission generally reported a more positive outcome when discharged home. Others commented on the difficulty they experienced reintegrating with families from whom they had been separated for a number of years.
- My mother turned up the day before I was 16. I had not seen her for years. I was handed over to her and we couldn't relate; I found it very hard to get on with the life and left for England.*
- 8.58** Witness reports about their discharge ranged between Schools who provided ongoing support and follow-up to others where witnesses reported being discharged without any discussion or plans, as discussed elsewhere. Forty six (46) witnesses reported being placed directly in employment by School staff when they were discharged. Many expressed ambivalence about the arrangements made for their aftercare. While the stability of accommodation and employment was valued, many reported that the lack of preparation for leaving, including the opportunity to say goodbye, was traumatic.

I found a bed-sit myself, I had to leave school as I had no way to feed myself, a teacher found a job for me in a local shop.

- 8.59** A number of witnesses reported that live-in work arrangements were helpful, providing a place to stay and some security in the absence of family or the necessary skills to live independently. Nineteen (19) witnesses described their first employer as their '*salvation*' in that they were kind, treated them well and encouraged them to socialise and in some instances to pursue further education or training. A small number of witnesses reported that they remained in their original place of employment for many years and a number have maintained ongoing contact with their former employers.
- 8.60** Twenty nine (29) witnesses reported that when they found themselves in difficulty following discharge, they received help and support from the religious staff in a number of Schools that maintained an informal open-door policy for ex-residents. Three (3) witnesses reported being assisted by religious staff when they became pregnant and were without other support.
- 8.61** Witnesses from a small numbers of Schools reported that they were allowed to live in the School for a period when they were first working while they were getting established. Others reported being offered temporary employment and lodgings at their former School when work placements were not satisfactory and reported being found jobs where they were able to train and prosper.
- 8.62** The Committee heard several reports from witnesses that former co-residents provided them with a place to stay and assistance with finding work when they were discharged. The women provided a substitute family network for witnesses who reported that they would otherwise have been alone in the world. The witnesses also reported that for some this network of former co-residents has remained a significant support throughout their lives.
- 8.63** Fourteen (14) witnesses reported that they returned to the School for annual summer holidays, in part because they had nowhere else to go, did not know how to make alternative arrangements for themselves and did not want their work colleagues to know they had no family.
- 8.64** Nine (9) witnesses reported being discharged to their 'holiday' or 'foster' families where they found safety, stability and, for some, life-long support. Other witnesses reported that these families assisted with finding them work and supporting them to become independent following their discharge.
- 8.65** Some changes in practice and procedures for aftercare were reported by witnesses who were discharged during and after the 1970s, with a small number of Schools establishing group homes on the grounds of the old institutions and others providing supported semi-independent living in associated hostels. The Committee heard 12 witness reports of places in hostels or transition houses being found for witnesses when they were discharged. Five (5) of these reports related to discharges after 1970. Other Schools provided practical and financial support for residents to continue education and training.
- 8.66** Four (4) witnesses reported being granted an early discharge to their parents following representations made to various authorities. Two (2) witnesses remained at home, without formal consent, following disclosure of abuse to their parents. Others became aware through records they obtained under the Freedom of Information legislation¹ that their parents had made

¹ Freedom of Information Acts, 1997 and 2003.

written representations to various authorities seeking their early release. Witnesses who had previously felt abandoned gave accounts of being comforted by this information.

- 8.67** Witness evidence of abuse experienced in the Schools is summarised in the following chapter, much of which was reported to occur in the course of day-to-day life as described above.