

Speech by Claire McGettrick on behalf of Justice for Magdalenes Research at the Dublin Lord Mayor Awards at the Mansion House, Tuesday 3rd May 2016.

Justice for Magdalenes Research is deeply honoured to accept the Dublin Lord Mayor Award on behalf of the Magdalene Laundry survivors and we sincerely thank Lord Mayor Críona Ní Dhalaigh for giving them this award. I can tell you that this award means such a great deal to the women here tonight, and indeed to those who cannot be with us.

Tonight you are meeting two members of JFM Research – Maeve O’Rourke and myself – but our organisation is very much the sum of its parts and I would like to acknowledge our colleagues who cannot be here, namely Dr Katherine O’Donnell, Professor James Smith and our co-founder and Committee Director Mari Steed, whose mother Josie spent ten years in the Good Shepherd laundry at Sundays Well.

However, tonight is not about JFMR – it is about the women, the survivors of Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries who have enriched each of our lives immeasurably and who have been our guiding lights over the past thirteen years. Tonight is also for the 100+ women who are still in institutionalised settings in the control of the religious orders. Finally, we also wish to honour those who died, those for whom the State apology came too late.

For JFMR, the survivors in contact with our organisation have become part of our extended family – we call them our grandmothers. I want to tell you a little bit about them, but firstly I wish to take a moment to set the record straight on their behalf.

The women and girls who were incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries have been wronged time and time again. In 1999, when our nation began to come to grips with its history of institutional abuse, they were excluded from the Government’s apology. Their stories have been used over and over, misrepresented, minimised and marginalised – or worse – not believed; many speak in their name, yet in truth most women remain voiceless. For decades

they walked a lonely road as the marginalised of the marginalised. They had to listen in silence, again and again, to hurtful stigmas being perpetuated, when in reality most of them were frightened girls and women who were locked up against their will.

On the surface, the women have been vindicated since Enda Kenny's emotional apology in 2013. Beneath however, there is the inescapable reality that the official State record on the experiences of Magdalene women is neither accurate nor respectful of what they endured.

The State's official position is that a very small level of physical abuse took place in the laundries and we absolutely refute this assertion. The Report which informs that position completely ignored 795 pages of survivor testimony submitted by Justice for Magdalenes which clearly outlined individual instances of physical assault and similar offences, as well as a prevailing culture of abuse in these institutions.

The State's official position on duration of stay is that most women and girls admitted to the laundries spent less than a year there, and we also refute this claim. Research conducted by our organisation on two Dublin laundries indicates that approximately half of the women registered between 1954-64 in High Park and Donnybrook died in those laundries.

Moreover, the Magdalene survivors present here tonight and the deceased women who are represented here by family members spent a combined total of **127 years and 10 months** behind laundry walls.

When it comes to the restorative justice scheme, the Magdalene survivors have been wronged even further. Three years after the State apology, the government has seriously undermined Magdalene survivors' trust, as it has cut corner after corner on the implementation of the *ex gratia* Scheme as recommended by Judge Quirke, and many issues remain outstanding.

For our organisation and for survivors too, the women who died deserve justice every bit as much as those who are living. To-date, JFMR has recorded the details of 1,663 women who died in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. In some cases these graves are unmarked, in many

others there are serious discrepancies. There are still other graves that have yet to be found and our work continues in tracing the final resting place of these women.

And yet, despite everything that has happened to them, one way you will always know that you are talking to a Magdalene survivor is that they think of others instead of themselves.

By now, most of you will have heard the experiences of at least some of the women who survived the Magdalene Laundries. However, the survivors are more than just the sum of their experiences in these institutions. Their resilience in the face of what must have seemed like insurmountable odds is awe inspiring.

Most survivors known to our organisation are mothers, and they will tell you that their children are the achievement they are most proud of.

Though they were subjected to unthinkable cruelty and though they continue to be wronged, these women are kind, loving, dignified and selfless, almost to a fault.

Another way you will know you are talking to a Magdalene survivor is that she will fiercely defend the most vulnerable. These women know what it is like to be the marginalised of the marginalised, and they are always the first to stand in the corner of the defenceless.

The Magdalene survivors are the most courageous human beings I have ever met; indeed, most of the women with us here tonight were involved in escape attempts from Magdalene Laundries, and some were thankfully successful. Unfortunately, the majority were eventually apprehended and returned by the Gardaí to the laundry.

Two of the survivors who are with us here tonight were incarcerated in Dublin laundries. Four of the deceased women whose family members are here tonight were also incarcerated in Dublin laundries. Two of these women died behind convent walls, having been incarcerated for their entire adult lives. I don't think any of them would ever have imagined in their wildest dreams that some day they would be honoured by the Lord Mayor of the city in which they were so wrongly incarcerated.

As I have said, for the women here tonight, and for those who cannot be with us, this award means a great deal, especially during this centenary year. In this year of commemorations we are honouring the brave women and men who brought about our independence, and rightly so. However, we should also take the time to honour those who were marginalised, including the women and girls of the Magdalene Laundries. In the years after independence, those who did not fit the mould were swiftly hidden away and silenced – these women and children suffered unimaginably for the sake of an idyllic image of Ireland.

Therefore, the fact that this award has been given to the Magdalene women during this centenary year holds special significance. So once again, from the bottom of our hearts, JFMR would like to thank Lord Mayor Críona Ní Dhálaigh for acknowledging the Magdalene survivors – our heroines, our grandmothers, our national treasures.