



Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) Campaign Summary

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) is a survivor advocacy group working to bring about a “Restorative Justice and Reparations Scheme,” including an apology and redress, for all survivors of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries.

No one has apologized for the abuse suffered in these particular institutions.

The Magdalene laundries were omitted from the Residential Institutions Redress Act, 2002, and consequently the Residential Institutions Redress Board excludes Magdalene survivors.

Historical Context

- Magdalene Laundries were institutions operated by nuns in which women, called “penitents,” worked at laundry and other for-profit enterprises
- these women were denied freedom of movement, they were never paid for their labour, and they were denied their given names and identities
- the daily routine emphasized prayer, silence, and work
- women had to be signed out of the Magdalene
- many remained to live, work, and ultimately die, behind convent walls
- after 1922, Magdalene Laundries were operated by The Sisters of Mercy (Galway and Dun Laoghaire), The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity (Drumcondra and Sean MacDermott Street, Dublin), the Sisters of Charity (Donnybrook and Cork), and the Good Shepherd Sisters (Limerick, Cork, Waterford and New Ross)
- all four Congregations are members of CORI and also managed state residential institutions
- the nuns do not release records for women entering the laundries after 1 January 1900
- the last Magdalene ceased operating as a commercial laundry on 25 October 1996.

JFM’s Campaign to Establish State Complicity

Mr. Batt O’Keeffe, T.D., then Minister for Education and Science, rejected JFM’s proposal for an apology and distinct redress scheme on 4 September 2009. He claimed:

- the state is only liable for children transferred from residential institutions
- the laundries were privately owned and operated
- the state did not refer individuals nor was it complicit in referring individuals to the laundries

JFM contends that the state was always complicit in the laundries’ operation. Moreover, this complicity, along with the state’s omission of due diligence to regulate or inspect the laundries, breached the Magdalene women’s constitutional and human rights.

JFM asserts that the Irish state:

- was aware of the nature and function of the Magdalene laundries
- was aware that there was no statutory basis for the courts’ use of the laundries
- enacted legislation to enable the use of one laundry as a remand home
- was aware that children and adolescent girls were confined in the laundries as late as 1970
- maintained a “special provision” whereby women giving birth to a second child outside marriage at a Mother-and-Baby could be transferred directly to a Magdalene laundry
- paid capitation grants to Magdalene laundries for the confinement of “problem girls”
- never inspected, licensed or certified these home as “Approved” institutions
- has yet to produce records for the women it referred to the laundries

- refuses to admit its complicity in referring women to the Magdalene laundries
- refuses to acknowledge its failure to protect women's constitutional rights
- refuses to apologize for its role in referring women to the laundries and therefore impedes "restorative justice" for this population of institutional survivors.

JFM's Campaign to Engage the Catholic Religious Congregations

JFM met with Cardinal Sean Brady in June 2010. He characterised our presentation as "fair and balanced." And, as reported by The Irish Times, he encouraged JFM to "continue its efforts to establish dialogue and a process of justice and healing for all concerned."

On the Cardinal's recommendation, JFM wrote to Sr. Marianne O'Connor, CORI's Director General, on 9 July 2010 and requested the opportunity to present its campaign. On 1st October 2010, Sr. O'Connor informed JFM that CORI would not meet with the group.

JFM has written to the four religious congregations on four separate occasions. To-date, none of the congregations are willing to meet with JFM.

JFM's Submission to the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC)

JFM submitted an inquiry application to the IHRC in June 2010. The submission focused on the State's obligation to protect the women's constitutional and human rights despite the fact that the abuse took place in "private institutions."

The IHRC Assessment, published on 9 Nov. 2010, concluded that there was significant evidence that the state failed to protect women and young girls from "arbitrary detention," "forced and compulsory labour," and "servitude." The Assessment recommends "that a statutory mechanism be established to investigate the matters advanced by JFM and in appropriate cases to grant redress where warranted."

Taoiseach Brian Cowen referred the IHRC Assessment for review to the Office of the Attorney General last. JFM is still waiting for the government's official response.

JFM's Submission to the UN Committee Against Torture (UNCAT)

JFM made a formal submission to UNCAT as part of the first ever examination of Ireland on 23 and 24 May 2011. The submission, including four survivor testimonies, highlights the continuing degrading treatment that the Magdalene women are suffering today because of the government's ongoing failure to apologise, investigate and compensate for the abuse.

During the UNCAT examination, Committee members insisted that the state has an obligation to conduct an independent investigation into abuses in the laundries as stipulated by Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention, and to ensure that survivors obtain redress in accordance with Article 14.

Further information about our campaign can be found at www.magdalenelaundries.com.