

ATTENTION, MR. COWEN

Does Mr. Cowen believe that women deserved the treatment received in the nation's Magdalene laundries? Does he really think there is nothing to apologise for? Or, does he simply not care?

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) questions Mr. Cowen's political leadership on this issue. Nine months have elapsed since we first circulated draft language towards a distinct redress scheme. At that time we also called for an official apology (in recent months, both Australia and Britain have seen fit to apologise for the forgotten generations of migrant children). Is there to be no redress, no apology, for Ireland's forgotten women and children—the nation's disappeared.

On 25 March, our group met with the Minister for Health. We asked Ms. Harney to acknowledge the official policy whereby women giving birth to a second "illegitimate" child in a State licensed mother-and-baby home were transferred to the laundries. Likewise, we seek explanation of capitation grants paid by the old Boards of Health for "problem girls" sent to these institutions—payments of £8.25 per capita per week in July 1972.

As a result of previous meetings, the Department of Justice now acknowledges that women were placed "On Remand" at the Sean Mac Dermott Street laundry. And, the courts routinely referred women to the laundries rather than enforcing a prison sentence.

The Department of Education now acknowledges that children were confined in the laundries as late as 1970. JFM contends that the department failed in its constitutional obligations to protect all children in these institutions.

Cont'd, reverse

Dignity Restored: The Magdalene Name Project

Justice for Magdalenes has compiled lists of women's names who died in the Magdalene Laundry at High Park Convent, Dublin; The Good Shepherd Laundry at Mt. St. Laurence, Limerick; and a gravesite located at St. Finbarr's cemetery, Cork (we will be adding additional gravesite names soon).

We have also compiled 1911 census data for many of the laundries; although, please note that in many cases very little data is supplied by the religious orders — for some laundries, only initials were supplied for the census (further reinforcing the notion that these women were not even "worthy" of a full name for the census). Names, where provided, are alphabetised. Visit www.magdalenelaundries.com/names.htm to view the data, photos and contribute information on a name.



Mary Collins and her children Craig, Laura and Anthony, at St. Finbarr's Cemetery (Cork), with the tribute to her mother, who spent 27 years in the Peacock Lane Laundry.

Continued Meetings

Justice for Magdalenes has held the following series of meetings with government officials and women's leadership groups:

Thursday, March 25

JFM delegation: Katherine O'Donnell, UCD and JFM advisory committee; Angela Murphy and Claire McGettrick, JFM coordinating committee

Department of Health delegation:

Minister Mary Harney; Patricia Ryan (special advisor); Patrick Lynch (Assistant National Director of the HSE); Barbara Ní Aongusa (Director, Office for Disability & Mental Health); Phil Garland (was in child protection for the Dublin Archdiocese, now in child protection for the HSE)

Monday, February 2

Department of Education Officials Peter Baldwin (Assistant Secretary); John Kelly (Principal Officer Residential Institutions Redress Unit); and Mary McGarry (Principal Officer)

JFM delegation: Katherine O'Donnell, UCD and JFM advisory committee, and Claire McGettrick, JFM coordinating committee

Monday, December 14

Officials from the Department of Justice
Officials from the Department of Education: no show

Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D., Labour, Spokesperson on Education and Science; Ms. Katherine Dunne, Chairperson of Labour Women; Ms. Kirsi Hanifin, Labour Party Women and Equality Officer

Tuesday, December 15

Ms. Joan Burton, Deputy Reader, Labour Presentation before an Ad Hoc committee at Dáil Éireann, hosted by Mr. Tom Kitt, T.D., FF; Mr. Enda Kenny, T.D., Leader of FG
Tuesday afternoon

Ms. Rachel Doyle (Outreach Officer, National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI); Ms. Katherine O'Donnell, Director, Women Studies, UCD

Minister Mary Hanafin, responding to a recent parliamentary question, betrayed the fact that the laundries did not comply with the statutory requirements governing social welfare payments. The Minister for Finance, responding to a similar question, refused to comment on whether the laundry "workers" ever paid taxes.

JFM has asked government departments to produce records for the women and children referred to the laundries. We have asked them to identify the statutory basis upon which the State sent women there. We have asked whether the institutions were ever inspected, regulated, or licensed. Instead of answers JFM receives assurances of "interdepartmental cooperation." We are told that records don't exist for women the State sent to the laundries. We are told the State cannot compel the religious congregations to release their records.

But the State was complicit. This fact is no longer in doubt. The question now is whether the government has the political will to provide justice for survivors? Their default position remains unchanged: the laundries were "privately owned and operated institutions." The overriding concern is to limit financial liability.

"A collar will protect no criminal." That was Minister Dermot Ahern's media sound bite the morning his department published the Murphy report. And still there is little appetite to call the four religious congregations that operated the laundries to account.

The nuns refuse to release records for women entering the laundries after 1 January 1900. Consequently there are no answers to key questions, e.g., how many women entered the laundries, why did they go there, how long did they stay, what became of their children, how many died behind convent walls, and where are these women buried? This lack of records differentiates Magdalene survivors from survivors of residential institutions—many children in industrial schools were wards of state, there was a committal order, capitation grant records exist. And, it is precisely this lack of documentation that empowers the State to ignore Magdalene survivors' calls for redress. Yet, the women and children in these institutions were Irish citizens too.

JFM is doing what it can to make relevant information available. According to the 1911 Census, there were 1,094 women recorded at the ten Magdalene asylums that would continue to operate after Irish independence. In 1956, the Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac reported a capacity for 945 women at these same institutions. Between 1926 and 1963, we know that the courts referred at least 54 women to Catholic Magdalene laundries (a further 4 women were sent to the Protestant Bethany Home). We know that in March 1944 there were 19 women "On Probation" at laundries and other religious convents.

We also know the numbers of Magdalenes buried in mass graves around this country: i.e., 178 at the High Park plot in Glasnevin, 101 at the Gloucester Street plot in Glasnevin, 72 Consecrated Magdalenes at the Sisters of Mercy Foster Street convent in Galway (Galway's ordinary "penitent" class are buried at Bohermore cemetery), 241 at the Good Shepherd plot at Mount St. Laurence Cemetery in Limerick, 72 at the Sisters of Charity plot at St. Finbarr's Cemetery in Cork, etc.

These women died behind convent walls at the end of a life characterized by hard labour, endless prayer, enforced silence, and the denial of basic human rights. Does the fact that they are dead mean Irish society owes them nothing—no apology, no dignity in having their identities recorded properly, no security from exhumation, cremation and reburial?

Magdalene survivors are making their case for redress and compensation. These women deserve to be treated with respect. Many are elderly. Some are still in the "care" of the religious congregations. Others remain scarred by past institutional abuse. Time is not on their side. And, lest one forget, there remains a particular stigma attached to the laundries. No one has apologised to Ireland's Magdalene women; no one has owned up to the fact that what happened to them was wrong. Simply put, many survivors will chose anonymity until this situation changes. Such change requires political leadership and courage and, to date at any rate, both are noticeably absent.



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Photo by Lee Pellegrini, Boston College Chronicle

News Coverage

Harney to raise question on laundries

Claire O'Sullivan, *Irish Examiner*, 26/03/2010

Request for Magdalene records to be released

Eithne Donnellan, *Irish Times*, 25/03/2010

Redress for Magdalene victims

James Smith, Letters, *Irish Times*, 25/03/2010

Redress for Magdalene survivors overdue

James Smith, Letters, *Irish Independent*, 25/03/2010

From Academic to Advocate

Sean Smith, *The Boston College Chronicle*, 17/03/2010

Magdalene victims awaiting apology

Justice for Magdalenes Coordinating Committee letter, *Irish Times*, 26/02/2010

Calling all survivors and families!

Justice for Magdalenes would like to begin hosting support meetings. We need your input – ideas for locations (in Ireland, the UK, US and Canada), to spread the word, etc. Let us know if you're interested in attending a support meeting by sending an e-mail to info@magdalenelaundries.com or by phone:

In Ireland: (353) 86 4059491
In the US: (1) 215-589-9329
In the UK: (44) 208-346-7479

Distribute this newsletter to anyone you know affected by the Magdalene Laundries. We would also like to begin collecting oral histories if you know someone willing to share their story.

We have also added an online tracing guide on our website for anyone trying to locate family members or obtain records. Visit www.magdalenelaundries.com for more information.

