

Justice for Magdalenes

Crocknahattina, Bailieborough
Co. Cavan, Ireland

Telephone/Fax: (353) 86 4059491
Web: www.magdalenelaundries.com
Email: info@magdalenelaundries.com



JUSTICE FOR MAGDALENES (JFM) IRELAND

Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review

**Twelfth Session of the Working Group on the UPR
Human Rights Council
6th October 2011**

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) is a non-profit, all-volunteer organisation which seeks to respectfully promote equality and advocate for justice and support for the women formerly incarcerated in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. Many of JFM's members are women who were in Magdalene Laundries, and its core coordinating committee, which has been working on this issue in an advocacy capacity for over twelve years, includes several daughters of women who were in Magdalene Laundries, some of whom are also adoption rights activists. JFM also has a very active advisory committee, comprised of academics, legal scholars, politicians, and survivors of child abuse.

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Ireland's Magdalene Laundries were residential, commercial and for-profit laundries operated in Catholic convents by four orders of nuns: The Sisters of Mercyⁱ, The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity,ⁱⁱ the Sisters of Charity,ⁱⁱⁱ and the Good Shepherd Sisters.^{iv} Between the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922^v and 1996, when the last institution closed, an as yet unknown number of Irish girls and women, estimated to be in the tens of thousands, were incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries and forced to carry out unpaid labour because they were perceived to be "promiscuous", were unmarried mothers, were the daughters of unmarried mothers, had grown up in the care of the Church and State, or were otherwise in vulnerable situations.
- 1.2 The effects of the Magdalene Laundries abuse on the women who are still alive today include severe psychological trauma, ill health, poverty, isolation and a deep sense of stigmatisation. The Magdalene Laundries were not included in the recent state inquiry into childhood institutional abuse in Ireland,^{vi} and survivors have so far been denied all forms of restorative justice. Not only has the State failed to apologise or initiate any inquiry or compensation scheme, but the religious orders involved have also refused to apologise to or compensate the women, or to allow any access to their records. This has created identification difficulties for the women and their families, in particular the families of women who died behind convent walls. The children of former Magdalene women, especially adult adopted persons searching to reunite with their natural family and/or discover family medical histories, are especially impacted by the inaccessibility of records.
- 1.3 The Magdalene Laundries were and still are officially regarded by the State as "privately owned and operated establishments" which "did not come within the responsibility of the State."^{vii} However, state archival records show that the courts referred a number of girls and women to these institutions on probation and as an alternative to a prison sentence, absent any statutory basis upon which to do so.^{viii} The government also specified one Magdalene Laundry as a remand institution under the 1960 Criminal Justice Act, without any accompanying system of regulation or inspection.^{ix} As detailed in Section 3 below, the State appears to have been further involved in the Magdalene Laundries' system of incarceration and forced unpaid labour through the involvement of the Irish police force in the placement of girls and women in the laundries and in the return of those who managed to escape, the tendering of state laundry contracts to these institutions, and the referral of women from state-funded mother and baby homes to Magdalene Laundries. In addition, several contemporaneous government departmental reports indicate a clear awareness of the confinement of children and unmarried mothers in the laundries.^x
- 1.4 JFM asserts that the Irish State is responsible for grave and systematic human rights violations regarding Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. As we outline in Section 3, the State's judicial and commercial dealings with the laundries and its knowledge of the incarceration of children in these institutions, along with its total failure to regulate or inspect the laundries, violated the State's obligations under domestic and international law to respect the women's and girls' human rights and to prevent and suppress their abuse by non-state actors.
- 1.5 In November 2010, as a result of an inquiry application submitted by JFM,^{xi} the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) assessed the human rights issues arising in relation to the treatment of girls and women in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. **The IHRC Assessment concluded with an official Recommendation to the Irish government to**

immediately establish a statutory inquiry into human rights abuses in the Magdalene Laundries and ensure redress for survivors as appropriate.^{xii}

- 1.6 On 11th November 2010, the Irish government referred the IHRC Assessment and Recommendation to the Attorney General for “review and evaluation”. No further action has been taken to date.

RECOMMENDATION: JFM recommends that the Irish government (i) apologises on behalf of the Irish State for the abuse perpetrated towards girls and women in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries, (ii) establishes a distinct redress scheme for Magdalene survivors and (iii) immediately adopts the IHRC recommendation to institute a statutory inquiry and compensation scheme.

2 Ireland’s relevant human rights obligations

- 2.1 Of most relevance to this submission given the timeframe of the Magdalene Laundries abuse (1922 – 1996) are Ireland’s obligations under its own Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). As the last Magdalene Laundry only closed its doors in 1996, we also refer to Ireland’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
- 2.2 The Irish Constitution came into force on 29th December 1937. Ireland became a member of the United Nations on 14th December 1955. Ireland ratified the ECHR on 25th February 1953. Ireland ratified CEDAW on 23rd December 1985, ICCPR on 8th December 1989, and ICESCR on 8th December 1989.

3 Ireland’s human rights violations regarding the Magdalene Laundries, 1922 – 1996

- 3.1 The survivor testimony available to JFM (see Appendix II) along with evidence contained in the Report of the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse,^{xiii} survivor accounts in the media, and state archival material (presented by JFM to the Irish Human Rights Commission and referenced in the IHRC assessment) points to a system of widespread, state-sanctioned unlawful imprisonment and slavery or forced labour of girls and women in the Magdalene Laundries on the basis of their sex and perceptions about their private lives, which resulted in the denial of a host of additional basic human rights.
- 3.2 The following paragraphs elaborate JFM’s claims that through (a) the State’s direct placement of girls and women in the Magdalene Laundries and (b) its failure to protect the girls and women from conditions and treatment of which it was aware or ought to have been aware because of its judicial and commercial dealings with the Magdalene Laundries, the Irish State violated numerous human rights of the girls and women in the laundries:

3.2.1 The right to liberty and freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention (Art. 40.4 Irish Constitution; Art. 3, 9 UDHR; Art. 9 ICCPR; Art. 5 ECHR)

Magdalene survivors make very clear that they never felt free to leave the Magdalene Laundries, and there is evidence that the Irish police force was involved in returning girls and women who did manage to escape.^{xiv} The women describe an overwhelming sense of despair that “once you were in the Magdalene, you knew you were never

getting out.” Many survivors recall how the doors out of the laundry were always locked and how the girls and women were under the nuns’ constant surveillance day and night. This testimony is echoed in the Report of the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse at Volume III, Chapter 18, Para 57. It would seem that the only way of leaving a Magdalene Laundry was to be signed out by a relative deemed by the nuns to be an appropriate guardian, or for the nuns to arrange for a girl or woman to take up a position of employment, often for little or no wages, at another church-run institution such as a nursing home or hospital.

In its official assessment, the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) concludes that “There is no clear information on whether or how girls or women left the Laundries or if they had a choice in doing so.”

While priests, nuns and family members (often under duress from official authorities or the clergy) were involved in the placement of many girls and women in the Magdalene Laundries, the IHRC Assessment notes that there are also records of laundry referrals by state officials, including members of the police, welfare officers and social workers. In addition, the IHRC notes that probation officers accompanied women to the laundries. The IHRC further notes that at least up until the 1950s, women were referred from state-regulated, church-run Mother and Baby Homes to the Magdalene Laundries after being separated from their children.

There was never any statutory basis for the incarceration of girls and women in the Magdalene Laundries, save for one provision under the Criminal Justice Act 1960 for the use of a particular Magdalene Laundry in Dublin as a remand institution. As mentioned above, in November 2009, the Irish Minister for Education and Science stated that the Magdalene Laundries were never subject to state regulation or supervision and that the laundries were privately owned and operated and did not come within the responsibility of the State.

The IHRC Assessment notes that between 1922 and 1964, the Central Criminal Court gave at least 54 women a suspended sentence on condition that they reside in a Magdalene Laundry. Court records indicate that the woman’s release date was sometimes left to the discretion of the Superioress of the laundry. Women and girls were also referred to Magdalene Laundries as a condition of a probation order imposed by the Courts. According to the IHRC Assessment, “records of how the probation of these women and girls was monitored, if at all, do not appear to be publicly available.”

The IHRC Assessment states: “Little appears to be known about the fate of probationers. For women and girls who were accompanied to Magdalen Laundries by Probation Officers on foot of a Probation Order, their entry into the laundries was clearly instigated by the State and should have been monitored by the State. If those women were obliged to remain in the said laundries beyond the period specified by the original Court Order, then the lawfulness of this form of detention is highly questionable under Art. 5(1) ECHR as it does not appear to readily conform to any of the six conditions under which a State may legitimately curtail a person’s liberty. Again, persons unlawfully detained in breach of Art. 5 are entitled to compensation.”

JFM also draws attention to Art. 9(5) ICCPR which provides that “Anyone who has been the victim of unlawful arrest or detention shall have an enforceable right to compensation.”

The State's involvement in the incarceration of Magdalene women and its abdication of its monitoring obligations stands in flagrant contravention of the UN General Assembly's *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment* (1988)^{xv}, which includes that any form of detention must be carried out in strict accordance with the law, that a challenge to the lawfulness of the detention must always be available, that accurate records must be kept, that there must be independent oversight of all places of detention, and that all persons under any form of detention must be treated in a humane manner and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

3.2.2 The right to be free from slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour (Art. 4 UDHR, Art. 8 ICCPR, Art. 7 ICESCR, Art. 4 ECHR)

Magdalene survivors unanimously state that they were forced to work in the laundry or in the work room sewing or embroidering from morning until night, six days a week, and that they were never paid for their work. This precluded any opportunity to contribute to a state pension – something that is felt acutely by the women today. According to survivors, refusal to work was not an option: “you didn't dare”. A rule of silence was imposed in the laundries and some survivors recall harsh physical punishment for infractions of this rule or any other.

According to the IHRC Assessment: “Taking into account the fact that the women and girls in the laundries were in a vulnerable and isolated situation, being dependent on the religious authorities in the laundries for their welfare, subsistence and liberty, and given that it appears that the women and girls in the Magdalen Laundries were obliged to work for long hours in the laundries through the use of coercion (through fear of a penalty if they refused), it is likely that there may have been a violation of Art. 4 of the ECHR.”

The IHRC Assessment notes that state prison laundry may have been washed in a Magdalene Laundry and that Army laundry was certainly washed in “institutional laundries”, according to parliamentary records. The IHRC concludes that “The State may have breached its obligations on forced or compulsory labour under the 1930 Forced Labour Convention from March 1931 and under the ECHR from 1953 in a) not suppressing/outlawing the practice in laundries particularly regarding women and girls in fear of penalty if they refused to work and b) in engaging in commercial trade with the convents for goods produced as a result of such forced labour.”

3.2.3 The right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Art. 5 UDHR, Art. 7 ICCPR, Art. 3 ECHR)

The IHRC Assessment concludes that on the basis of the information provided to it, the treatment of the girls and women “would if proven undoubtedly come within the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment under Art. 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)”.

In addition to the cruel, inhuman and degrading nature of unlawful incarceration and forced unpaid labour, further physical and emotional maltreatment recounted by survivors includes deprivation of identity as the women and girls were given “house” names, forced to work and eat in silence and barred from keeping close friendships; beatings, verbal abuse and cutting of hair for infractions of rules; lack of adequate nourishment, warmth or hygiene; medical neglect and conditions of work which resulted in later disability, premature death and lifelong gynecological problems;

denial of family visitations and interference with private correspondence; denial of educational opportunity; and denial of rest or leisure opportunity.

The IHRC notes that Art. 3 ECHR not alone prohibits serious ill-treatment by agents of the State, but also requires the State to put in place mechanisms to protect against abuse. It states that “Regardless of whether the State was aware of the conditions in Magdalen Laundries... it ought to have known of the conditions in those laundries. Had the State put in place an oversight or monitoring mechanism in respect of residential institutions such as Magdalen Laundries, as it was arguably obliged to do, this could have fostered a better appreciation of the conditions and possibly have acted as a means of protecting the human rights of persons in Magdalen Laundries.”

3.2.4 Other rights

The unlawful incarceration, slavery/servitude and forced labour of girls and women in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries, in which the State directly participated and failed to prevent, further violated the **right to education** (Art. 42 Irish Constitution, Art. 26 UDHR, Art. 13 ICESCR) of the girls who were incarcerated there (the available evidence suggests the incarceration of girls as young as 11). The abuse also violated the **right to respect for one’s private life** (Art. 12 UDHR, Art. 17 ICCPR, Art. 8 ECHR), given that incarceration was based on the nuns’, the State’s and society’s perceptions and misconceptions about the private actions of the girls and women. In addition, once inside the Magdalene Laundry, the girls and women were denied any privacy, including in their correspondence.

The Rule of Silence and the constant prayer which was imposed upon the girls and women violated their **right to freedom of opinion and expression** (Art. 19 UDHR, Art. 19 ICCPR, Art. 10 ECHR) and their **right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion** (Art. 18 UDHR, Art. 18 ICCPR, Art. 9 ECHR). Further rights which were violated include the **rights to just, favourable and safe conditions of work, equal pay for equal work and rest, leisure and reasonable limitation of working hours** (Art. 23, 24 UDHR; Art. 6, 7 ICESCR; Art. 11 CEDAW), the **right to a standard of living adequate for one’s health and well-being** (Art. 25 UDHR; Art. 11, 12 ICESCR), and the **right to take part in the government of one’s country or in the conduct of public affairs** (Art. 21 UDHR, Art. 25 ICCPR, Art. 7, 8 CEDAW).

Overall, the abuse suffered by the Magdalene women amounted to a grave and systematic violation of their **right to equality, non-discrimination and equality before the law** (Art. 40 Irish Constitution; Art. 2, 7 UDHR; Art. 2, 3, 26 ICCPR; Art. 2, 3 ICESCR; Art. 2, 3, 15 CEDAW; Art. 14 ECHR) because but for the fact that they were women and girls, they would not have been imprisoned.

3.2.5 Continuing violations: **Right to an effective remedy (Art. 8 UDHR, Art. 9(5) ICCPR, Art. 13 ECHR); Right to equality and non-discrimination (as above)**

The women who were in Magdalene Laundries have the right to an effective remedy for the abuse they suffered as a result of the Irish State’s gross violations of its human rights obligations towards them. The exclusion of the Magdalene Laundries from the recent state apology and redress scheme for institutional abuse in Ireland discriminates against this class of survivors of institutional abuse, who suffered on the basis of their sex. That the Magdalene Laundries were not state-funded (unlike the institutions covered by the recent redress scheme) does not absolve the State of its responsibility to remedy its past human rights violations with respect to the laundries, as it did not preclude state responsibility to prevent the abuse in the first place.

Author:

Maeve O'Rourke, Advisory Board Member
Justice For Magdalenes
morourke@law.harvard.edu

Appendix I: Endnotes

ⁱ The Sisters of Mercy operated Magdalene Laundries in Galway and Dun Laoghaire.

ⁱⁱ The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity operated Magdalene Laundries in Drumcondra and Sean MacDermott Street, Dublin.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Sisters of Charity operated Magdalene Laundries in Donnybrook and Cork.

^{iv} The Good Shepherd Sisters operated Magdalene Laundries in Limerick, Cork, Waterford and New Ross.

^v Magdalene Laundries existed in 19th century Ireland and originate from 1768.

^{vi} See Residential Institutions Redress Act, 2002, available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2002/en/act/pub/0013/print.html>.

^{vii} Letter from Batt O'Keeffe, TD, Minister for Education & Science to Tom Kitt, TD, (Sept. 4, 2009) (available upon request).

^{viii} The Central Criminal Court Trial Record Books of 1926 to 1964 document fifty-four cases where women found guilty of infanticide, manslaughter (of an infant) or concealment of a birth agreed to enter a Magdalene laundry for periods between six months and five years, in return for a suspended prison sentence. See JAMES M. SMITH, IRELAND'S MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES AND THE NATION'S ARCHITECTURE OF CONTAINMENT (2007). According to James Smith, a 1926 committal order shows that the state's probation officer discharged the woman at the relevant institution and that the court stipulated that the state meet the expense incurred in travel to and from the institution. Smith further states that, "[t]he case files reveal that the religious congregations actively sought these committals: the mother superior wrote directly to the court or to the relevant county registrar communicating the institution's willingness to accept the woman in question."

^{ix} DAIL EIREANN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, Written Answer from Dermot Ahern, TD, Minister for Justice, Equality & Law Reform to Ruairi Quinn, TD (Jan. 19, 2010): "Following the enactment of the Criminal Justice Act, 1960, the then Minister for Justice approved both St. Mary's Magdalen Asylum, Sean McDermott Street, Dublin 1 and Our Lady's Home, Henrietta Street, Dublin 1 (not a Magdalen Asylum) for use as a remand institution for female persons aged from 16 to 21 years. Prior to 1960 the only option to the courts was to remand such persons to Mountjoy female prison. Payments were made by the Department of Justice for those remanded by the Courts to the two institutions in question." "It appears that these orders/arrangements were made by the courts without reference to any Department of State. The requirements of a probation order, including its duration, would be made known by the court to the offender. The records of such orders are court records. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform does not have any legal authority to instruct a religious organisation to provide full access to their records," available at <http://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2010-01-19.2114.0>.

^x The 1970 Reformatory and Industrial Schools Systems Report acknowledges that in some cases where reformatory schools refused to take girls "known to be practicing prostitution or who, on conviction for an offence [were] found to be pregnant," the girls were "placed on probation with a requirement that they reside for a time in one of several convents which accept them; in other cases they [were] placed on remand from the courts." The Report continues: "A number of others considered by parents, relatives, social workers, Welfare Officers, Clergy or Gardai to be in moral danger or uncontrollable are also accepted in these convents for a period on a voluntary basis. From enquiries made, the Committee is satisfied that there are at least 70 girls

between the ages of 13 and 19 years confined in this way who should properly be dealt with under the Reformatory Schools' system.”

Also evident from official documents is the State's awareness of the placement of unmarried mothers of more than one child in the laundries. The Report of the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, Including the Insane Poor, published in 1928, recommended the establishment of state-funded residential institutions dedicated exclusively to first-time unmarried mothers, or “first-offenders”. “Mother and baby homes” were duly founded, and regulated and funded by the state. In 1933, the Department of Local Government and Public Health Annual Report stated that, “[w]ith regard to the more intractable problem presented by unmarried mothers of more than one child, the Sisters-in-Charge of the Magdalene Asylums in Dublin and elsewhere throughout the country are willing to co-operate with the local authorities by admitting them into their institutions. Many of these women appear to be feeble-minded and need supervision and guardianship. The Magdalene Asylum offers the only special provision at present for this class.”

^{xi} Available from JFM upon request.

^{xii} IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, Assessment of the Human Rights Issues Arising in relation to the treatment of women and girls in Magdalen Laundries, November 2010, *available at* http://www.ihrc.ie/download/pdf/ihrc_assessment_of_the_human_rights_issues_arising_in_relation_to_the_magdalen_laundries_nov_2010.pdf.

The IHRC Recommendation reads as follows:

That in light of its foregoing assessment of the human rights arising in this Enquiry request and in the absence of the Residential Institutions Redress Scheme including within its terms of reference the treatment of persons in laundries including Magdalen Laundries, other than those children transferred there from other institutions; that a statutory mechanism be established to investigate the matters advanced by JFM and in appropriate cases to grant redress where warranted.

Such a mechanism should first examine the extent of the State's involvement in and responsibility for:

- The girls and women entering the laundries
- The conditions in the laundries
- The manner in which girls and women left the laundries and
- End-of life issues for those who remained.

In the event of State involvement/responsibility being established, that the statutory mechanism then advance to conducting a larger-scale review of what occurred, the reasons for the occurrence, the human rights implications and the redress which should be considered, in full consultation with ex-residents and supporters' groups.

^{xiii} See Volume III, Chapter 18 of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009) *available at* <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/03-18.php>

^{xiv} See statements in Appendix II; *see also* the Reformatory and Industrial Schools Systems Report, 1970: “A number of [girls] considered by parents, relatives, social workers, Welfare Officers, Clergy or Gardai to be in moral danger or uncontrollable are . . . accepted in these convents for a period on a voluntary basis.”^{xiv}

^{xv} U.N. General Assembly, *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment* [Principles for the Protection of Persons under Detention], adopted by General Assembly resolution 43/173, 9 December 1988.

Appendix II: Selected witness statements

[Comments in square brackets are the Editor's (JFM)]

Testimony A

How did you come to be in the Magdalene Laundry?

I was reared up in New Ross, County Wexford, *[at the Good Shepherd's Industrial School in the town]*. I was made a ward of court by the guards and the judges. I was taken there by my mum, I wouldn't let my mum go – I was squeezing her round the neck.

...Anyway finally I reached the age of 16 and you were supposed to go out of the school then. I was put out into domestic work working with one of the nuns' own sisters, Sr. C___'s sister - her name was Mrs L___ that had this big farm.

... It was a very lonely place for me because we were out of town ...And I think I was there about eight or nine months and I wrote to the nun who was in charge ... And after that she got me another job looking after two kids, and then I moved onto a place in Ennis, Co. Clare ... I was with them for another little while, and then just after my 18th birthday, I went back to the convent because we had nowhere to spend our holidays. The convent was our home ...

And I told this nun that I was very unhappy in the big wide world, that I wasn't coping very well, and that I thought everybody was talking about me when they passed me on the road or anything. If I saw them looking, I was thinking "oh my god they know where I've come from" ... I was isolated because I was out in the back of the beyond once again with these two people and their little boys...I wasn't part of that family. That was hard to cope with... I cried a lot. And I decided "I'll go back to the school now for a couple of weeks' rest and maybe start a job fresh."

And after that two weeks, I was down the town and I met up with one of my friends, she was also on holidays. Her name was M__ F__ – we were good friends when we were at school like, you know. And we were down the town and I met this girl that we used to know ...And she shouted over the town: she says, M__ come here, come and have a look at my baby!" And I went, "When did you get married A__?" And she says, "I'm not married." I said, "well that's not your baby then A__."

...So we went back up to the convent, and before I went to bed that night the nun called me back... and she said "I believe you met A__ B__ today." "Oh yes," says I to this nun. "And she says the baby in the pram is hers and she's not even married!" says I to this nun. And she said to me, "We were very wrong to leave you out of the school without the facts of life." I said "what's the facts of life"? I didn't even know what she was talking about.

That was it. The next day I was put in a car and taken down to Cork City, that's about 70 miles away from New Ross, Co Wexford? So I was taken down to Cork City, down to the Good Shepherd Convent in Sundays Well.

Life at Sunday's Well Magdalene Laundry

... I didn't know where I was for a few minutes, until I realised they had the same habits on them as the nuns which I had just left. And all they were talking about was "what shall we call her?" And I keep saying "I'm M__ J__," you know, because as soon as I left school I went back to my own name. And then they said, "Oh no we can't call her M__, or M__ - J__...we've got a J__. I know, let's call her G____." And I thought, "G____? I'm going to be G____ O'N____?" But the nuns said, "No you only have one name here." I said, "Why's that?" "Never you mind why that is."

They didn't tell me. And then I was taken over to the big girls' side, the Magdalenes' side. And I thought: that was the end of my life. I was in the Magdalenes. We were so threatened as children to be put over there [*New Ross, like Sunday's Well, had both an Industrial School and Magdalene Laundry*].

As children, we weren't allowed any contact with those Magdalene people. We were hit around the face if we ever spoke to them, if we bumped into them, you see. We didn't know why that was either, you see. And in Cork I was suddenly among all these people I was kept away from as a child, you see.

Anyway, I was put in the laundry first and I got friendly with this girl called C____. We looked very alike, we had very, very jet black hair. And my hair was nice and long – but it was cut up to here, wasn't it.

I was changed out my clothes and everything, and I was crying and crying and crying. They even took my lovely shoes off me as well, you know...Anyway I said, "what happens to me now," you know.

And as I said I was put in the laundry and C____ and I became very good friends. She was my own age – well she was 20 and I was just 18. And I was in there for about 3 weeks. I used to have a good happy time with C____ you know when all the work was done. It was hard work until it was done you know, because our hands, our wrists...we had cold water rash all up our arms, because we were never allowed to dry our hands between each bit of work.

Anyway this one Friday we were all finished, everything was cleaned. We'd cleaned all the floors and everything. And C____ put me in one of these big trollies and she was pushing me from one end of the laundry to the other and I'm holding on for dear life. And as she pushed me down the laundry, the Mother Provincial of the order and Mother M____ C____ who was over the girls you know, the Magdalenes, standing there in the doorway. They always put their hands under this bit of their habits you know. And I couldn't stop myself, I was in the middle of the laundry! Very funny, it is funny now.

And then when I got to the bottom I just put my feet on the wall to stop myself, you know. But when I saw the Mother Provincial, and Mother M____ C____, I thought, "Oh my god, I'm in for it now."

Anyway, when Mother Provincial went back up to Dublin – that was the Mother House then – I was called into the office. Mother M____ C____ said, "I want G____ in here now." So she said, "Right, you're not having any recreation for the next month. No leeway. You'll sit in the work room, and do your knitting – or whatever. And from Monday, you'll report to the work room, the sewing room."

Because she knew I was good at sewing – the nun that put me in the Magdalene Laundry in Cork, from New Ross, Co. Wexford, told Mother M____ C____ that I was good at sewing.

So that was it – I was put in the sewing room, and that was a way of tying me down, really you know because I'm very high-spirited. I'd speak up for myself. I always did even as a child. I was always whipped you know, because the injustice of the nuns – they could say what they liked to us; they

could call us all the names under the sun and we could not answer back. We had no power at all. I mean the Guards [*Garda Síochána, the Irish Police*], the doctors, the priests and the nuns were to be feared in them days. And we did fear them. And the amount of times I asked to go out of that place, to be left out.

And I will never forget the day President Kennedy was shot. I was standing in a line asking to go to bed early cos I suffered badly from migraines, and we never even saw a tablet, we didn't know what a pill was, what a pain reliever was. And I said "I'm feeling very, very unwell." And as I was in that long line waiting to go to bed early, one of the girls said "President Kennedy's just been shot."

It was November, 1963. I'd have gone in [*to Sundays Well*] that July, '63. And my 18th birthday was June '63, you know. And all of this was happening. And I was oblivious to what was going on around me half the time.

And the only way I could ever speak to my friend C____ was to go out and pretend to be washing my apron, because we always wore aprons to save the rags we wore, you know, which they called clothes. And T____, she was an auxiliary one, she's one of the people that wore a habit there, she wasn't a nun – she vowed to stay there for the rest of her life, you see [*The Good Shepherds subdivided the women into three classes—the 'ordinary penitents,' the Children of Mary, and the Magdalene class, also called Auxiliaries*] -and I said to T____, "I need to go out and wash my apron, it's very dirty, it's sticky." But it wasn't really, it was my way to get out to see C____, you know. And she'd come over and pretend to be washing something in the big deep white sinks.

...Anyway I remember I used to get very, very bad periods, very bad. And sitting down didn't help me. I used to walk around the grounds – I used to say to T____, "I'm not feeling well, I must walk, walk, walk." My periods were very very bad. No painkillers at all.

And I said to I____, the girl that used to do the embroidery for the vestments – we used to do all that in the workroom – I said "Come and walk with me in the grounds." Anyway, we were walking and we were chatting, we were walking and chatting, and we forgot the time. This was like October when the rosary was said every night, before we went to our meal. And we didn't realise it was getting dark.

And so we were still out, and when we decided to come in, all the place was locked up. The lights were all off. And I__ lost it really; she was really nervous, she got in a panic. I'm standing on a drain from the laundry, which was lovely and hot. And I'm standing there keeping myself warm. And I__ was banging on the door, banging on the window to try and get in. I said "I__, you can't get in, there's no-one there."

...Anyway, we were banging and banging and banging and I said to Ita, "Let's get in the window, and work ourselves down on the pulley from the windows, down into the workroom." ...And just as we both landed on our feet, we were walking down towards the church - because we were both in the choir, you see - and Mother A__ and C__ were coming up this great big long corridor, and she's shouting at us, "I__! G__! Where have you been? Where have you been?"

...I was punished then as well. No recreation for a whole month.

Escape attempt

Then, I had this bright idea, this is like the next summer now, I was about - 18, 19, 20, 21 – I was 22 years old, I was four years there then, and I said to I__, "Right, you work in the laundry...try and get a couple of dresses for me and for yourself, yeah? And we won't go to supper that night – I've got migraine and you've got a bad stomach, ok?"

This was the plan. We were going to run away, the two of us. And I knew that sometimes the door leading out of the little office off the sewing room wasn't always locked. But the outside, into the sewing room – that was locked. But this night, somehow they forgot to lock it.

So while they were all having supper, we were supposed to be upstairs in bed as we were sick. But we weren't. We decided to run away, the two of us. We went down the little alleyway down from the workroom, all the way into Cork city – yes, we ran all the way. And we got to the city anyway, and C__ said "I'm going in on the fruit machines, I might find some money in the slots." Because we had no money.

...And this bloody great big guard [*Garda Siochana, member of Irish police force*] come along, and he said "Hello, what's your name?" I made up a name. I was very good at thinking on my feet - I still am to this day. I told him a lie – I said I was somebody else, I can't remember now. And he said, "What are you doing out here?" Oh, I said, I'm waiting for my friend. I gave her a new name as well. "And where is she?" I said, "She's on the slot machines in there", you know, not that I knew anything about the fruit machines.

And he said, "Can you show me where she is?" Because they had heard that there was two girls missing from the convent – the bells ring out, don't they, right? All hell let loose. The nuns ring the church bells and they get hold of the guards, you know. And they're on the lookout. Where else could we go except the city, because we were quite near the city.

And he said, "Come in and show me your friend now." I said, "I don't want to go in there." "Come In!" he shouted at me. 'Course I got frightened didn't I, walked in and I'm walking all around this arcade.

Of course she had jet black hair and a little fringe like mine, and I said, "There she is over there." And I called her by her different name, you know. And she didn't answer me, she didn't know I was calling her. He said "Why don't you call her by her real name?" He said "You're from that big house up the road, aren't you?" Course that was it. I started crying, and they brought me back.

So I'm saying to this day now: if I wasn't kept there against my will or I wasn't a prisoner there, that guard had no right to take me or my friend back up to that place, had he? No. So I'm wondering who the guards listened to - the law of the land or those nuns? They were working hard for those nuns. Everything the nuns asked for, they gave them. So we had freedom for two hours. That was all.

We were terrified of the guards - you know what I mean? I was a bit cheeky when I gave the wrong name and so on. When he said "are you from that convent up the road?" I said no.

But he only had to look at my shoes to know I was, and my haircut, you know.

...And that night – I think it was about 9.30 – we were driven back up to the convent. It was nice to be in a car for a change... We didn't really know where we were going to be taken to, whether we were going to be taken to the police station. But then of course we should have known better, we were going to be taken back to that jail, you know, because most of the fences and all that had barbed wire over them.

Barbed wire on the top so you couldn't get over, or if there were galvanized partitions between us and the outside world they were all spiked, there were sharp edges on them so you really couldn't get over them either.

What happened when you got back with the policeman?

Well I got whipped. I had no supper that night as you might gather, because we were supposed to be sick in bed the two of us. And we weren't allowed any recreation.

The amount of times I was punished, and sometimes I was put standing in the corner and made an example of when all the girls were there having their recreation. They were all in their own groups and I'd be standing in the corner in this great big sewing room – we used to put our sewing machines away. That was where we had our recreational time. And I'd be standing in the corner and the other person who had got up to mischief would be standing in the other corner. We weren't allowed to talk, you see. That was our punishment, and when the nun wasn't looking I'd be sticking my tongue out. I was quite cheeky and I think that's what got me through, you know.

Abuse and neglect and forced labour in the Magdalene Laundry

The food was horrible in there. I think we were allowed a bath once a month. At that time, I used to get very bad blackouts in the bath, the water – I don't know if it was too hot, I still can't have a very hot bath to this day, I have to be cool, you know. I used to just get blackouts and the first one I ever got, I hit my head off the taps because I fell as I was trying to get out, I fell backwards. And my head was bleeding badly. It was just moistened with some tissue and that was it. "Now get on with it, time for your supper", you know. I really should have really had my head stitched because it was open and every time I laid my head on the pillow it was blooded, you know what I mean. But what could we say?

Our dormitory now – I mean the girls that worked in the packing room, there was lots of private laundry that came in. My friend, another girl, her name was D___ there but her real name was ____, she used to work in the packing room, and I used to say to her "If you get the News of the World" – because the private people used to wrap their laundry up in the News of the World. We didn't know what was going on in the outside world unless we got those papers.

Anyway, I was there with her one day in the laundry when the nun wasn't there – Mother A___ used to run her show – and as she was opening up this parcel, the fleas were hopping out of this laundry. And I went, "Oh God D___, how do you work in here?"

Little did I know, I'm sleeping next to one of the girls who worked in the packing room, and I wondered why I was getting fleas in my bed. Because we were all mixed in, weren't we? The fleas that were coming out of that private laundry.

The hotel laundry was clean, I know that. Because we had six roll mangles to do their sheeting, beautiful, beautiful and clean. And then we had a shirt master – all the shirts were just clipped onto this thing and they were put into this room and it was all the hot air blowing through the shirts to dry them. And they actually had an automatic folder to slip the shirts into the bags. Oh it was very well done – that was towards the end of my time there. The laundry started getting a bit more modern, you know. Not that it was any good for the girls, because they worked long hours regardless of what modern machine was there, you know.

The more work that came in, the more money that was made.

There was two girls in the sewing room hand smocking all day long, and I did all the putting the dresses together. I'd probably turn out about 7 dresses a day. That was a hell of a lot of work, yes. And they were all hand stitched on the hem roots, you know – none of the stitching on.

And then we had a big sale of work every November, so all the work we did in the work room was displayed to the public, all the beautiful smocked dresses. They were really beautiful stuff because

they got most of the material from France – Viyella was the main material we used. It was lovely to work with. I did enjoy doing my sewing, it was a pleasure.

They were put in the little show room where Mother M__ C__ sat all day. They were all displayed in there, and the public used to come and buy them. And when it came to Holy Communion time, we'd make Holy Communion dresses. Confirmation time, we'd make all the Confirmation dresses.

And then we made all the vestments, the banners for all the public processions out on the road. And the big capes they wore for the benediction? Can you imagine how, and all that had to be hand sewn all around. My friend I__ did the embroidery on it, you know. She was bent over a machine all day doing the embroidery. And then we did all the machining, and put all the braiding on them you know.

Do you have any idea how much they charged for one of your dresses?

I heard one of the girls saying – bearing in mind this is 1963 to 1969, all those years ago – about 25 pounds for a dress in them days, by them days' money. They were making big money. It was Viyella.

'Course it was all hand sewn at the bottom, there was no stitches showing. We daren't. We had to do it all, it was fantastic work I did there. And I was earning them mega bucks.

And as I said we had a display of our work every November. And I used to do beautiful gowns, nightdresses, bed jackets and dressing gowns, all matching. And they were all hanging around this big sewing room – that was the only time we didn't sew, when the public came in, to show the work. And they bought them for their staff as Christmas presents, and so on.

Did they know, would you say, that you weren't getting paid?

Oh no they didn't know that. Not at all. Because we weren't really allowed to meet the public.

I remember I did like a tapestry really of two stag's heads. And they were really made for fire screen work. The material I used was boneen – do they still use that over there? It's a very loose woven, off-white material, very sought after in those days.

...Anyway, I did these beautiful stags' heads. And the way it was done was, you put copy decks at the back, you glued it all at the back, then you turned it over and you cut it all, then you brushed it through. And it was beautiful. I did three cats as well.

And this bloke, I was called in this day, and this bloke said, "How long did it take you to do that?" And I said "Six months", which it did, in my own recreational time. It was done on a big frame, you know. And I said "It's really for a fire screen", that's all I knew. "Well", he said – there was two of them actually on display, and he paid big money for them two.

And I remember him saying to one of the nuns, "I'm going to get these framed", he said. "I'm not going to be putting them by the fire, they're going to be on the wall", he said. "And I'd like two more done for next Christmas." So that was my job, because none of the other girls could pick it up. The amount of times I tried to show them, to get someone else to do it for me, because it was slow work and I only had recreational time to do it with, because I had my own sewing to do you know. Never got a penny for it.

And then I used to make lovely embroidered cushions as well, hand embroidered cushions. Very fancy ones with the pleats and everything. And also, if anybody new came into the convent and they decided to put them in the work room, I was the one to show them how to use the sewing machine.

...There was a lot of blank times in my life in there. I think that was my way of coping with being locked up. I mean we never asked about pay - we didn't know that we were supposed to be paid to work, you know what I mean? We did not know.

We had no rights whatsoever. Food was really inedible, but when you're hungry you have to eat anything that's given to you. I used to get very, very sick, I'd always a weak tummy.

And, oh yes I was talking about the fleas that were surrounding me in my bed – I used to be scratching all night. The dormitories were freezing. You had no hot water to wash in; you got up and you were washing in very, very cold water. And the only thing you had of your own was a toothbrush. The rest you shared – somebody else's flannel. And some of them weren't very clean, you know.

I didn't mind the cold water, as long as I could wash, you know. Because those poor girls out in the laundry, they sweated mad. And I heard one of the nuns one day saying to this poor girl, she was quite elderly, she said, "You stink! You're perspiring."

And I said, I shouted back to this nun, she was a horrible nun, I said, "No wonder, how is she supposed to wash in cold water?" "You get back into your own sewing room! Wait 'till I see Mother M__ C__." I said, "Well, do you want me to call her out for you?" says I to her. I was real cheeky, I really was, you know.

You were hit, or you were punished by your hair getting cut shorter and shorter – for talking out of turn, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for being late coming down from the dormitory, down to breakfast and all that. It was like a regimental place, really, everything was timed.

Did they have a rule of silence?

Oh yes.

And another thing that used to happen there in the refectory, at meal time – we weren't allowed to talk, but there was always somebody reading a book. ...I never did end up being a reader, thank god. I was too shy, I really was. I lost my shyness when I married my husband... But yes, there was always somebody there and their dinner was in the oven going dry until everyone else had finished eating. Then she'd have her dinner afterwards, you know.

And we had this priest, Fr. B__ was his name. We used to have the Vincentian priests from down the road, they used to come up and say their masses. And I got very friendly with him. I spoke to him one day – I said, "Can you do anything about getting me out of this place?"

And he was the only priest that came up without an escort from one of the nuns. He used to walk right past the nuns – he did not like the nuns, I can tell you that now. And he'd walk straight past all the nuns and he'd come straight into my sewing machine, and he'd say "Are you still here G__?" "Well", I said, "I am, I'm here in the flesh. What are you going to do about it, Fr. B__?" you know.

And he'd say, "I'll go in now." And he used barge in – he never used to knock on that door, Mother M__ C__ would be sitting in there, you know. And I used to hear him – he'd never shut the door behind him either. He used to say, "Right, G__'s still needing to go out, she's ready to go out." And I used to hear Mother M__ C__ say, "Oh, G__'s not ready for the big wide world yet."

And Fr. B__ used to say, "But G__'s very capable, she's making lots of money for you with all these dresses she's making", you know. And all the other nightdresses I used to do, and the vestments and the surplice and the cassocks – we used to make them as well, you know.

Of course they didn't want me to leave – I was very useful to them, you know. And that was the best information Mother M__ C__ got, from that nun that put me in there from New Ross, was that I was very good at sewing. And they thought, "Right, we've got a good one here", you know.

The word privacy never entered our lives there. The only time we had a bit of privacy was when we went to Coventry. In other words, if we went in and asked to leave, and she'd say no, then we'd go and sit on the stairs, we'd go on strike as it were. It was called going to Coventry in them days, you know.

We'd sit on the stairs. I'd always try and sneak a little book or something up there with me so I could read and then the time didn't seem so long while I'm sitting on the stairs. And everyone would be passing you by, and I said to one of them one day, I said, "Bring us a bit of bread and butter, will you?" They said, "I'll get hit if I do that." So you'd go hungry as well, you'd go off to bed hungry, you know.

It would end because you gave up, because you were hungry, you needed to get back into your work and so on. I did it quite a lot and so did a lot of the other girls, you know... we copied the older girls what they were doing, you know. We were only little, we were only 18.

So there were a lot of you doing this? Oh yes. Going on strike, wanting to leave? Oh yes. Every day they'd have to deal with these requests? Oh yes, exactly, exactly.

And what would they say?

They'd say no you're not ready to go out yet. But we were ready and able to do all the work that was there for us, eh? Exactly.

Our letters were censored in and out. We were not allowed to write what we wanted to. We had to say we were happy and all that there, you know.

We wouldn't be allowed to say about my treatment when I did anything wrong, like that night being out in the grounds when I was supposed to be down praying and singing. Or what happened to us when we broke the rules. We weren't allowed to say anything like that in our letters – we had to say we're having a good time here, I love it here, you know, the time goes quickly and all. It did not go quickly. It went very, very, very slowly. Every year was like three years.

Did you ever have visitors?

No. My sister at one time lived up the road ... And she tried so many times to come in and see me. But I never did see her.

She tried to come in and see me but she wasn't allowed. "Oh, G__'s not behaved herself too well today", like you know – that was always the answer. "G__'s misbehaving again today", you know. I wasn't always misbehaving.

We got up at between six and half past six. Then we went down to the church to hear mass. Then we had a bowl of lumpy gruel – porridge, whatever you would call it. And now and again we used to have bread and dripping and cocoa at night. The dinners were horrible really. My dog got treated better than I was treated in that place.

You had no privacy even in the bathroom. One of the auxiliary women looked after – there was three baths at the end of the laundry... Them days you were not allowed to have a bath when it was your period, you see. You were not allowed. That was the norm. And if you had your period ... the

auxiliary who looked after the bath – she'd call your name: "Right G___, it's your bath." And I'd say, "I can't." "Why not!" And she'd make me say why, you know. And everybody'd know then, it was the wrong time of the month for me, you know. Which was very, very embarrassing.

And if you were a bit slow or backward – like there were quite a few of the people there with learning difficulties, god help them, they were treated even worse than us. They were given all the dirty jobs.

When I first went there I was totally embarrassed, because that's something I never wanted to happen to me, you know. The end of my world had come. Because that's what they told us when we were little – "if you misbehave, you'll go over the other side with the big girls."

Because they were called penitents in those days – we were never able to say the word penitents. We called them pennys, you see.

And I remember one day because when I was in the school bit, in New Ross, we used to do the shamrock every year. We used to go out into the field, pick the shamrock in buckets, bring it in, wash it all, and put it in cellophane packets to be shipped over here to this country.

Anyway, myself and B___ K___ ... we went down near the farmyard – course the big girls [Magdalenes] used to run the farmyard – this is now I'm at school now at the minute. And we emptied this bucket on this big pile...and this cow came over thinking it was food for it, you know. And this cow went, "Moo". And B___ was terrified of this cow, and this girl, one of the Magdalenes said "shoo!", shooing the cow away because B___ was screaming crying, you know... And the Magdalene tried to save her, you know. And had she been caught she would have been punished badly. For being with the girls. For coming in contact with us, the children.

We were not human in their eyes. I remember one day I was trying to do the operetta. Mother M___ was a perfectionist you see. And we learned all the songs first, and all the dialogue. And then we came to the acting bit – well I couldn't act. I was like a statue in the middle of the floor but I could sing to my heart's content. And she said, "G___, will you move! You're like a great big elephant in the middle of the floor."

...On a Sunday, if there was extra work to be done, we would do it. But other than that, it would be prayers all day. I remember one Christmas morning, we used to have a load of visiting priests down to Cork City, and once they had their masses said in the outside community they'd come up to our convent to say their masses. And I remember kneeling there one Christmas morning – knelt for nearly thirteen masses. That was our Christmas morning, honest to God, that's not one word of a lie. Thirteen masses. And some of them wanted us to sing for the masses as well. I didn't mind the singing.

...And I remember one of my friends, she liked this priest – she was quite a few years older than me – and I remember she was having holy communion at the altar rails, and she nearly bit his thumb off! I thought that was so funny. That's the sort of things they got up to those poor girls that were in there, a lot longer than I was. I was there 6 whole years and I thought I'd never see the outside world. I really did.

And the job they gave me leaving there was, I was stuck on a train in Cork City and I travelled all the way up to Drogheda. And when I got up to Drogheda, there was nuns waiting for me up there. St. John of God nuns – they were nursing sisters in them days. And then I was taken from Drogheda station right up to St. John of God hospital in Newry, Co. Down. And that was the day all the troubles started in Northern Ireland. January 1969.

How did you manage to leave the laundry?

She probably got fed up of Fr. B___ asking for me all the time, you know. Because Fr. B___ was very good to me. I used to write letters to my friends – we had different names as you know in there. And we didn't know why we had different names. Have you heard why we had different names? I will explain now why we had different names. I did find this out years later, I did ask one of the nuns.

Fr B___ used to do my posting for me. I used to go to confession and if there was no-one in the church I used to say (whispering) “Post that for me to P___” – another girl that was in the convent with me. Her name was L___ in there, you know. And he used always post my letters to her, and she used to post them back to him and I'd get them from him, you know. But that was how I kept in contact with my friend – she was over here by then [*in England*].

The reason our names were changed was – well this is what I was told, but I think perhaps they had another reason for doing it – the reason I think our names were changed was so that we wouldn't be able to trace our friends when they left.

That was my way of seeing it, but what I was told later was that a lot of the girls in there came from the city, and there was the docks in Cork city where all the big ships used to come into. And a lot of the girls were taken from the docks and put into the magdalenes for whoring themselves with the men, you see. So the names were changed so that if we got hold of any of the local papers of the city and we saw the courtcase that they had appeared in, then we'd know why they were in the Magdalenes in the first place.

That was the reason I was given – so that we wouldn't be able to read anything derogatory about the people that were in there. Whether that was true or not, I don't know.

I didn't know that till I left. I wouldn't have looked down on them because I wouldn't have known what the word prostitution meant in those days. I was from the school – two years out in the big wide world and I never learned anything while I was out there – and then straight back in with those nuns.

And did they give you any warning the day they let you go?

Ah, that was the worst ever. That was the worst day of my life, going into that convent and leaving that convent.

Now, the auxiliary that looked after the people in the infirmary, her name was B___, and she was sort of well above all the other auxiliaries. She was It, she was the cat's whiskers. Anyway, I was getting up this morning and I just had my towel in my hand to go to the wash basin to wash and so on. And she knew I was good at sewing, and if a zip got broken I'd be able to re-thread it onto the teeth bit and re-sew it for them. And she called me, she said “G___! Come here, can you do my zip for me”, she said. I said “yeah ok I'll be a minute”, you know, putting my towel down on my bed. And I went in after her, and as soon as I went in after her behind that door, through the infirmary, she says, “Come on, quick, she says, you're going.”

That was the words she said to me. Well, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say. My heart dropped. I thought, “I'm going!” How am I going to cope with this? I was in there all that time, you know. “What am I going to do? How am I going to cope?” There was all these hundreds of questions running through my mind – “how am I going to go? What's going to happen to me?”

They didn't even tell me. The auxiliary that was in charge of my group – C___ was her name – she took me down to the station in Cork, because we were never left out of that place really. On the odd

occasion we'd go to the seaside and that was it. But we'd never really walk down the town or anything. What would we walk down there for? We never had any money, you know.

And I'm saying to this woman, "What's going to happen to me? Are you going to leave me on this train on my own? I've never been on a train before in my life." She said, "Don't worry, there's somebody going to meet you up at the other end." "Who?" "Nuns." "Oh nuns again? Am I being put into another?" – I thought I was going to another Magdalene convent. I really didn't know what was happening to me.

Then I arrived at the John of God hospital in Newry, Co. Down. And they were all strangers to me all these girls that I was working with. I was put up on the maternity ward. I didn't know nothing about babies or how you're feeling when you're pregnant or nothing like that. I did see horrible things though, young girls coming in to have babies – they'd have to bring everything in for that baby, and then nuns from another convent would come in and take that baby away. They were unmarried, you see. And I thought that was horrible.

...I never really divulged to any of the girls I was working with where I actually came from. I was too ashamed. That would have been the last straw for me, if one of the nuns had broke my confidence. I was there only seven months because any penny I earned in the hospital I saved up to get over here to this country [*England*].

Testimony B

How did you come to be in the Magdalene laundry?

On the day of my leaving of the school [*Industrial School in Galway*], my sister who worked in Ennis, in St Joseph's hospital – it was for old folk whose families couldn't look after them – picked me up to take me to that same hospital as a wards maid.

So down I went and I worked there. But I never saw any money. I was always told: "If you want anything, let us know. And we'll keep your money safe for you, because we know you're not very good at handling money", or something like that. And so that was ok. My sister then came over to England, and I was still there...I worked on the wards and I worked helping the nurses ...And I could be asked to go down to the chapel and clean out the chapel, or I could be asked to do little jobs here and there. I was supposed to be 16 but I wasn't 16 – that September I was just 15. Because they didn't have my birth certificate.

Then one Sunday morning, it was after mass. And mass used to be about 12 o'clock... I was asked to change the flowers on the altar afterwards. I loved that job. So I was up, and the chapel that was up there – say that's the altar, there were two side doors here and one at the very end. It was in the shape of a cross. So I'm up here and I'm changing the flowers. And one nun came in this side entrance and she calls out to me. And I could see the other nun coming in the other door. And I felt strange – somehow I felt, something within me, something was going to happen to me. They were going to grab me or something. Something was going to happen.

And I made a run for it, and they grabbed me. And they bundled me into this car outside the chapel. And I remember being driven away there. And I was saying to them – because there was a nun on either side of me in the car, and a man that was driving the car – and I was saying "where are you

taking me to? What are you doing to me?” you know, I was crying. “You’ll see, you’ll see.” And I remember them saying to me, “you’re going to the Magdalene Laundry.” Oh, when I heard that word, you know.

So we got there anyway, and they took me in this green side door. I can’t remember too much of the first day. I was given this kind of uniform to wear and I fell into a pattern the same as the rest of the girls. And I’d learned, I’m there for life. So I had to accept it, get on with it.

Did you ask them why?

You couldn’t – you didn’t dare ask a question, you didn’t dare.

The day before was Saturday, and I went into - this end of the chapel, the morgue was outside it...And when a patient died, we’d put them on a trolley and take them up here, and I’d put them in the morgue and lay them out. And the doors were always unlocked. And it was a Saturday, and I’ll never forget it.

I went in there, and this old man was dead on the slab. And this porter that worked there, he came in and he was talking to me, silly talk. I didn’t know him but I knew him to see. And the next thing, the nun came in. She must have seen the man going in there – there was no harm in me going in because I was used to going in – and the next thing she saw the porter coming in and she came in and says “You, out!” to me.

And that was it. Nothing. The next day was Sunday and the next day I was bundled into that car.

They knew you didn’t have any family left in Ireland?

Of course, they knew my circumstances. They knew everything about me, because they already knew when I came from the Industrial School. That’s why they were looking after my money. This was the way the nuns did things in Ireland, with people like me. You had no say.

Abuse and neglect in the Magdalene Laundry

...And I’ll tell you, they were making money out of us, and we did suffer. We’d go to mass in the morning, about half past six and by half past seven breakfast, and from 8 o’clock till about half past five – because 6 o’clock was the rosary – that was standing over the sink. There’d be all boilers – there wouldn’t be washing machines because there weren’t washing machines in those days – and my job, and granted I was lucky because I wasn’t there as long as some poor devils, but all the time there was a row of women here, a row of young girls, and the collars of the shirts was my job. And you’d have to put the carbolic soap on and scrub it up and down, and then it goes on to the next person. And that went on – it was like a factory.

And you weren’t allowed to talk to each other, you couldn’t kind of have a laugh or a joke with the girl next to you, because there was always somebody in the background, a nun, and if she wasn’t a nun it was one of her henchwomen, like the older ones who had been there a long time. And they had to get the work done, they had to get the work out. And it was all done within a week. And they used to take in laundry from hotels, our own school – the children’s school [*Industrial School*] I grew up in - Christian brothers, all the laundry in the big, big places. They used to bring them and have them out at the end of the week.

And the van used to come – of course we all had our jobs to do, but the thing was there, we could never – it was in our heads that we were there till we would die. Because when we were children growing up [*in the Industrial School*], the Magdalene laundry had this awful reputation... and that

was the threat they held over us, apart from beating us, telling us that we'd end up there. The nuns would tell us this as children.

...[*In the Industrial School*] If you did something, just ordinary beatings or anything like that and you might get one who tried to be a bit lippy or something – you know there were some of us who would try and speak up for ourselves and some of us that wouldn't. And I was one of those that would try to speak up for myself, and I'd get pulled by the hair of the head and brought up and given an awful beating. And she'd always say, "You're heading for the Magdalene Laundry, girl", you know that kind of a thing.

...In the Magdalene laundry it was a well-known fact that once you went in there you never came out. Because the locks – you couldn't walk out, because all the locks would be on the doors, you couldn't. Unless a family of yours took you out. Say somebody claimed you, and took you out. Then that was the only way, or else you'd go out in a coffin. You know, you died there.

So it had this haunted effect on us children. We didn't know too much about the gruesome inside of it. But it was always a threat that hung over us. So having experienced that threat myself, it was a hell of a lot worse than what happened in the schools. Oh my god, I still cry when I think of it. I still cry.

There used to be long, long, long tables. This will give you an idea of the kind of food we had. And if you went into the Magdalene laundry with manners, you definitely wouldn't come out. Because when we'd all have our place around the table - big long table and benches – and when we'd get our dinner, there used to be a couple of tin plates. You know the little potatoes, the green potatoes, the small green potatoes that you throw out? They'd be in a big plate there, one there, one there and one there.

And I'm trying to give you a picture - Even though we wouldn't like the potatoes, it was survival; you had to grab, and it's no use having manners and letting everybody else because there'd be nothing left for you. First time I went there I was frightened to get my hand in there, and of course if you don't it's gone and you go hungry.

I'd learned to grab my potato when it came out like the rest of them. And that's what we had every single day. I think we might have got a bit of cabbage and a bit of meat or something. But that was the shocking bit, was the potatoes.

And then for breakfast -what you got for breakfast was fried bread, and it wasn't fried bread, it was just like bread. And the tea would be in mugs, and the grease would be sitting on top of the tea.... They had a bit of a kitchen upstairs and they used to boil the water in those big pots they used to boil water for bacon and cabbage, and of course they wouldn't be washed out properly so the grease would be floating on top.

And you'd get a little bag of sugar if you took sugar. And I took sugar and I was given a little bag, type of muslim bag, and you keep it on your person, and you'd have seven teaspoonfuls – one for each day of the week. And of course everybody who didn't take sugar would take it and give it to somebody else, you know.

And it always reminds me a bit of the prisoners who were on the boats, on the ships going to Australia – when they were down in the cellars and they had to grab what they could to eat, because otherwise – it was again survival. And that's as near as I can describe it.

And that went on every day, so you got kind of used to it. But you knew you could never get out of it unless someone took you out. And I remember myself – I seen this woman die, I seen two women being taken out very ill – and I watched this woman dying, day by day by day – she was in the same

dormitory as I slept in. And then when she got very, very ill, when she was near death's doorstep, she was moved into a side ward.

And we'd go in there and out, in there into the dormitory and we'd still see her dying there. That is very haunting to watch. It rips your heart out. I was 15 there, and when you watch this – you think when you see a person dying, it doesn't mean a lot to you because to you that person was old, you didn't understand what was going on, we just thought she was old, she was sick, she was dying – but then it also leaves – even when we went to mass, and her coffin was up on the altar so we had to pray for her, don't know where she was buried couldn't tell you that. But it left an awful empty feeling. It left a feeling that you're never going to get out, and that's what's going to happen to you one day. That's what's going to happen to you one day.

Did this woman ever see a doctor?

If she did, we never knew. Because she was for days lying – she could have been dying for two weeks, or three weeks. That's what it looked like to me, and for days – she was in the same dormitory as I was, and she just lay there motionless.

And then towards the very, very end – I suppose they knew when her time was up, they moved her over to a small ward. So we still could go in there. And I remember going in there too, because it's like a curious child. I didn't know the woman, I didn't even know her name. but she just lay there. And then the next thing to see her – and then to realise that one day this will happen to you. Your freedom is totally gone. It then dawns, it then sits in.

...And I remember telling myself "I have to get out of here, I have to run away. I have to get out of here, I have to run away." And I remember preparing myself, actually preparing myself. And I thought to myself "now, if I run away from here, I'm going to need a change of clothing, because I can't go out in the Magdalene laundry uniform." So I took some child's, some school's cardigan – it was a navy cardigan and inside they used to have a laundry label on them – and I kept this cardigan and I took off the label and I hid it upstairs in my cubicle. And that was a start.

...Because I knew I couldn't go out in the clothes I was wearing. Everybody would know you were from the Magdalene laundry if the law came after you! Oh, if you tried to run away and you were caught, anybody would know you were from the Magdalene –anybody local would know you were after escaping from there. It's like a prisoner. You're escaping in prison clothes. They'd all know that you were out from the prison. But if you had other clothes on your back, they wouldn't know.

Would they have brought you back?

Oh they would have! The nuns would have got the guards [*An Garda Siochana – Irish police force*] out. Oh they would. The nuns would have got the guards to go out and bring you back. Oh the guards knew all about it. And the locals knew about it.

We knew that was – it's like I said about the girl dying. You knew all those doors were locked. And you knew damn well that if you made that escape, if you were lucky to make it, unless you got into the back of the laundry van or something like that to escape, there was no way out. And if you did make an escape, then the law would bring you back. The guard would bring you back. So they had you. You couldn't get out of there.

How did you come to leave the laundry?

...I don't honestly know how I came to be out. How the circumstances and the surroundings of how I came to be out. But I spent my first Christmas there, after leaving the institution [*Industrial School*], I spent my first Christmas in the laundry. And there used to be groups of nuns and groups of people that used to come to the laundry, and us laundry women used to have to stand and sing for them in a choir. It was the entertainment in a way. And that was ok, we all had to do it.

And this is only what I think happened – I didn't know nothing until around March. It was way after Christmas – it was March. And one day then I was called by one of the henchwomen to go upstairs and go to my locker, and whatever I had that belonged to me, and there was somebody waiting for me at the gate.

And it was my old teacher, Ms. B____. But she never told me – because you were never allowed ask questions, and you didn't dare ask a question – and she said “I'm taking you back to the school.” So I went back to the school. I never, until this very day – the Magdalene laundry was never discussed me.

But I think one of the nuns had recognised me in the choir and happened to mention it to our own nun, and she got me out. But until that – I'll never know. It wasn't my family that took me out.

How did you feel when you left the Magdalene Laundry?

It was a nice sunny day, and Ms. B___ called for me, and I think I had a parcel with a few bits of clothes in it. And we came out through that big green door. And it was like I was going from darkness into light. Because I can remember seeing the daffodils. It was my first sight of freedom. And I can remember the daffodils played a big part in my brain... The light in the skies. I knew I was out – the gate was behind me, and I was on the other side of the gate...and even today when I see daffodils, I remember that day.

And I didn't go wild, because I didn't know what lay ahead. You never did when you were in an institution. You never knew what was going to happen to you, the day after, the day after.

Experience of the laundry and effects of the abuse

...I was one of the lucky ones that got out. But that time left haunting nightmares in my head ... When we were in the laundry it was constant work, except Sunday. It was constant work all the time. And you weren't allowed talk, and if we were caught you'd get a wallop on the back with a stick or a belt. So you'd be told to “silence”. Talking was the devil's work anyway, do you know what I mean – and all this kind of trash.

And I never, never forget – I'm 67 now and I looks like it was only yesterday. It feels so vivid in my memory. And I never let any of my children go to a Catholic school. I never had them baptised. Because to me it's such hypocrisy. When you talk of God – God was a man who was born in a stable. You know he was a poor man who was born in a stable. And these nuns and priests had the best food, the best of everything. And we had scraps, you know?

We never saw any money. Of course we weren't put in there to earn a living, we were put in there as a punishment - we were going to be slaves for them...I'd already done a stint in the industrial schools and then come out, and maybe been out about three months, and then ended up here in a Magdalene laundry. But for what I will never know.

... The nightmares still haunt me. And I have never really been well. And I've always felt an outsider, looking in always. And even my life over here in England – I never felt part of a community.

...Whatever walk you take in life, you always felt an outsider. You never seemed to fit in. It was very hard to hold relationships, I think. Because you always felt nervous, frightened, scared. It's like you were somebody in the background. You'd wish that the ground would open up and swallow you. You didn't want to be noticed. You know, you shied away a lot ...I used to live a kind of a false life. My face used to smile, pretending everything was ok. But I used to be so nervous inside... and you couldn't tell anybody. You wanted to be like everybody else, but you couldn't be like everybody else.

We never saw money. *Did you ever ask to be paid?*

We didn't dare. You did not dare speak to the nuns. They were like royalty. You would have been cheeky if you'd asked. What they would say – it was insubordination. “How dare you?” You'd be frightened to ask. You know, you were frightened of them. You were actually frightened, that you were frightened to ask for your money.

Did anyone ever ask to leave?

Well I couldn't honestly say anyone did ask, because they knew... you might cry, and wonder what's going to happen to you. But we were all in the same boat. The only ones that would leave would be the ones with family. And we had heard – say for argument's sake my brother was over from England and he went to take me out of there, and he had to sign some documents and that – if he didn't have a steady job or he wasn't able to look after me, they wouldn't let me out. You had to show, prove to them that you were capable of looking after me.

Did anyone ever refuse to work?

You didn't dare, love. It's like – I've never been in prison but from what you read and see on the television – you didn't dare. You didn't dare backchat. You didn't dare refuse to work. You'd be beaten.

The nuns would always beat you. They'd beat you for just talking. They'd wallop you. They were all the time beating you with their sticks and their canes and all that.

It's very hard to explain to somebody who hasn't – if I was talking to somebody who'd been in the industrial school, they'd understand. Because they were used to that. But you asked could I leave or could I go – you didn't even dare to ask. Nuns were like ...you didn't dare. It was sinful, disrespectful, to even try to talk to a nun. If a nun spoke to you that is different, but you didn't dare to speak to a nun.

How do you feel about the Magdalene laundries being excluded from the Redress Scheme?

...I think once the gates opened, we should have all got in there, all of us. Because everything then was exposed ... The Magdalene laundry was a different field, right enough. But a much, much harsher field. Much, much harsher.

And the mere fact there was that once inside those doors, you knew you were never going to get out. That was very daunting on your mind. And to watch somebody dying, day by day...

...I couldn't waste away in the Magdalene. I wasn't going to. I wasn't going to. Even if it meant I was to make that escape and get killed doing it, I wasn't just going to lie down there and take it.

...In the Magdalene laundry, it was the religion that took over, that imprisoned you. But this is where the government is hiding: they obviously knew what went on behind those doors, well they may not have known the depth of what went on, but they knew that there were women in there. And they knew

it was a service, a laundry, the ‘Magdalene laundry.’ And they must have known. The guards would have known because if any of those girls did try to run away or anything, the nuns got onto them. The Garda knew – the Garda in Galway, the Garda in every county knew where there was a Magdalene Laundry. And if you ran out the door and you were in their clothes, they knew that you were from the Magdalene Laundry.

We used to wash the laundry from the children’s school and who paid for that? The industrial school. They’d have the big wicker baskets, and they used to go out on Friday and come back the following Friday...but somebody had to pay for that. And where did the taxman come in here? Were they exempt from tax, the nuns?

Where are the missing women behind those doors? Where is their pension? What happened to them? It’s like they disappeared. I’m talking about the older ones now, that were there from very young, and maybe until the day they died. I mean even if, say when they died that’s the end – but what about the woman that might have been put there when she was 18 and probably, as I don’t know, got out when she was 25. From 18 till 25, where’s her pension? Who paid the stamps? Who put in the stamps? Somebody has to answer those questions. They were the forgotten people of Ireland.

If something was to happen, I would expect an apology. I would expect answers – why. And as most of us are old, what’s left of us, and I’m sure most of us are very ill in different ways, I would say something towards a pension.

...An apology would open the gates, I would say. An apology would open up the gates and the government would then have to recognise this did happen in their own yards, in their own grounds, and their own counties, their own towns. And there’s councilors for every town – and they must have known. You know you’ve got the councilors for every town, what we call MPs here, for different boroughs – they must have known. The Gardai must have known.

...I am still treated for depression, for years and years. And I had tried to commit suicide many times in the past. I never found happiness. I felt like broken pieces, and I never felt in one piece, together, solid.

And I am also very, very glad that I’ll go to the grave and know that this came out [*the Industrial Schools abuse, through the Redress Scheme*], and also I hope that the Magdalene laundry gates will open as well and the whole truth will come out. Because that’s very, very sordid.

... To be born and put into an institution is the beginning of a very sordid life. Unless when you left that institution and things worked out for you – you were able to get a job and you were content, and you met the right person and life got a bit better for you. But you never forget, you never, never forget.

You weren’t really free in Ireland, if you were in circumstances – it was supposed to be a free country. It wasn’t free. It wasn’t free at all.

And the government didn’t give a toss. Because where was the justice? Where was the justice? I was never in prison, I never did nothing wrong.

And then as well, since I’ve heard a lot about and read a lot about people who had anything to do with the Magdalene laundry or the industrial schools, and they tell of children being born out of wedlock and all that. And you put this picture in your head – that there was Catholic Ireland, one minute they’re preaching to you that you should get married and have children. And yet they said they wouldn’t give you birth control. They didn’t believe in birth control. But when you had a lot of

children, and you were a poor family, what's going to happen to you? So most of those children that came from big families probably ended up in industrial schools. So it's a vicious circle. It's a vicious circle.

Testimony C

How I ended up in the Magdalene Laundry

It was 4th April 1958 I went into the convent. And in November 1964 I came out.

11 o'clock in the morning, the priest ... came. Because to begin with I was living with my grandmother—in fact she brought me up.... And my mother was single so she took off to Dublin to work. And she worked there. Unfortunately my grandmother died in 1955 so in the end—I was only 12 then—my mother came back from Dublin.

And she said that she'd take me, we'd live where my grandmother was. So we did for about 18 months but then this morning, this Friday morning ... a knock came on the door and this parish priest came in and said "I'm taking M___ to the Good Shepherds [in New Ross]. I've been up there, they have a bed for her—I've seen to it that they've got a bed. So I'll be coming back for her at 3 o'clock."

So I was surprised my mother didn't ask him any questions or anything. But I didn't have time—anyway 3 o'clock came. And my mum said to me, "Oh look, I'll get you out." I said, "why am I going?" And she said, "to be honest M___ I don't know."

First Days in the Laundry

... Anyway I rang the bell and this nun came down. And this nun was real nice. So she brought me, I was walking and walking and walking and I thought "my god" ... there was corridors, there was under passageways, there was everything. Eventually we got there, and she brought this auxiliary [*one of the three categories of women—Ordinary Penitent, Child of Mary, Auxiliary (also called Magdalene)*] and she said "this lady will take care of you."

So up we go to this dormitory—she had these clothes and she said "I want you to put those on. And we're changing your name from M___ to B_____." And even though I was 14, I was more like a 12 year old really. I didn't have the sense to ... you know I was so apprehensive and thought, "my god, you know – this is a different life completely."

And she said "you'll sleep here" (there'd be 12 I think in the dormitories, they varied sometimes there was 12). ... And so then I went downstairs to eat.

The Daily Routine

... You would go to work at 8, with a half an hour for lunch. Back normally till 6 o'clock, but if it was a bank holiday, you had to make up the work—you were missing a day so you had to catch up. And that meant you were back till 10 o'clock at night.

And then you get up the next morning at half six, off to church, back to work. Then you had one day, just one day, off—which would have been on a Sunday. But even on a Sunday I could have been called on to do the food. We had to serve each other. We had a rota where you had to serve everything, and then you'd have to also wash up, and that was your Sunday gone.

... Your recreation was walking around the yard in a circle. That's where you spoke. That was after your evening meal. If you weren't doing the wash up yet again, or whatever – you could be maybe asked to clean or anything.

Just to go to bed was a blessing. You couldn't talk in the dormitories because there was a nun in a little window. We had to dress – to see us dressing, with your nightdress down here, you'd take off one bit and then. No privacy.

The work: laundry, knitting, embroidery

So a week went by. And then I was called and told I was going to be given some work in the laundry—in the packing room. And that meant dealing with the incoming laundry—you checked it all in and you marked it and you put it in bays to go to the laundry. You do that every day in the morning and then in the afternoon you go and you put it all out in another room when it was all done, all ironed, and you had to pack that and get it ready for the laundry men for delivery. But when the laundry men were coming in you had to go out of the room. You weren't allowed be in there, you had to go out.

You had to put the big sheets from hotels everything through them. It came from hotels, all over Kilkenny, Grague, Carlow, all those places. All around New Ross, Enniscorthy, Waterford. Waterford had its own Good Shepherd convent there. All those in that area.

After evening recreation, you would do your Aran sweaters. We all sat in a group. You sat there and you did your knitting until it was time to go to bed. Now that was Aran sweaters, which they were getting paid for.

Embroidery, all these beautiful tablecloths, altar linen, everything—they were getting paid for that.

And for me because I was the youngest, I was so tired. It was absolutely shattering... All we ever knew, my life from 14 ½ until 21, all I ever knew was work.

Prohibition of friendships

Yes, evening recreation was the only time we could speak to each other. But there were certain times even during recreation, you weren't allowed. And as well as that, if you were over-friendly with anybody, you'd either be changed from that dormitory or changed from that group. And because I was 14, I used to always get moved around—they used to be trying to protect me in case I'd be picking up anything from the older girls. Some of the women were older and a bit wiser and that. ... And it was just a total nightmare.

Coming of age

And the other thing is that I didn't have my periods when I started there. And I got them in there. And this nun came briefly just to say what they were about, and then I was given these towels—oh mother of god they were like hard material with your number on them—mine was 59. And when you changed them you put them into this bin to go back to be washed.

And I used to faint for a while when I got them, when I first started. And a painkiller was out of the question, and you still had to work. I'll always remember the day I started being a woman, it was very, very bad.

Abandonment and isolation

Then Christmas time – my mother went to England, and my sister went to England; they were all gone. They left Ireland as soon as I went to the nuns. So I had nobody. ... She came before she left—I'm sure someone had spoken to her— because I remember her words, “as long as you're alright M___, I'm happy.”

So they had all gone. Christmas, there was nothing. No presents, nothing. And loads of people were getting everything. And you felt so alone, so useless. It was horrible. There was this one nun, and she gave me – she used to say “they can't say anything, I'm giving you a present.” She always put some little thing on my bed. Sometimes underwear or maybe a scarf, or there could be something holy as well. But it was the thought.

And we'd get Christmas over with.

There were friends of my sister's, like a family that we used to be friendly with in school, there was 8 of them. And they were in England and they were friends with my sister and my sister asked them if they'd come and see me. And they did but they weren't left in. The nuns said I'd get upset.

My sister in law came—she only lived about a half an hour down the road. She wasn't left in.

And one of the girls that I worked with in the laundry, when I left I managed to track her down – she told me she sent me parcels, she sent me letters. She used to do my writing for me because I couldn't – yes I've improved, a bit. But I used to try to write to my sister, so she used to do it for me. And then when she went out, she said she tried to be there for me because she knew I had nobody, and I never knew anything of it. Never knew anything of it.

And when did you find out that your relatives had tried to visit?

I was over here [in England]. I was over here, and then because when we went home my sister in law said to me “M___ we tried. We tried. “

So you gave up. ... It was horrendous.

Education

No, I had no education. Nothing. That was dropped. No education whatsoever. When I went in, I was still school age. I was going to school.

Why was I in there?

When I asked the nuns, they said that they didn't think it was fair for my mother to have to stop work to look after me. Which is rubbish because she could find work, hard work but she could find it around there.

But I think it wasn't that. I think it was being illegitimate. Priests had no mercy for anything like that, none. And you were reminded of it in the convent as well. The nuns would say, “well you can't go to England, you'd get in trouble. Your mother now has made her life.” And then they used to say, “well, and Fr. N___ doesn't really want you to go, he doesn't think you're ready for that.”

But the only person I ever saw there was the priest, a visit from the priest with a big bag of sweets. But he also had about four others in that convent, four more girls as well as me. I wasn't the only one put in by him.

Escape and punishment

Oh yes, girls did try to escape. Very, very frightening. Because some of them felt they had to stand up for themselves. And they would run away. ... But you see I think that scared the life out of me, I wouldn't ask. I was too frightened. Some of them used to run away and be brought back by police. And then they could be transferred to another convent if they did it.

Asking to leave

Oh I did ask him [Fr. N____], several times. Oh I did. And he just said, "We'll wait and see." But then I got this splinter in my hand from polishing the floor early in the morning. ... So they had to take me down to the hospital. And I had to stay there.

I was in there for a week and that was the best week of my whole life. ... I used to run around and help other people, other patients, talk to them. And the sister called me into the office and she said to me, "would you not think of asking to leave, and try and get yourself a job?" And that made me get angry and think, yeah I can do better. That was 1963. I started asking. I was 20. I was there for 6 ½ years.

Stigma and self worth

Yes, the doctors and nurses knew where I'd been, because you see I only lived 3 miles from there. So they knew the convent very well. And you know in a way you were so ashamed to say you were in the convent to some people, because it's a stigma. If you've been in the Good Shepherd convent, it's a stigma—you mean nothing to them. You're nothing.

The impact of being in the laundries

We didn't realize how people felt about the Good Shepherd convent and what a name it had until we came out.

A terrible name. You were just nothing. Like that's where you deserved to be if you were an unmarried mother. And I didn't realise till I came out how awful it sounded—when we were in there, I think we probably didn't feel as ashamed because we didn't realise.

Because we went in at such a young age we didn't realise how bad it was. What a bad name it had. And it really took a lot out of you. You felt worthless. And you felt you couldn't achieve anything because all we were meant to be doing was cleaning laundries, cleaning floors. Because, that's how being in the convent had made you.

Getting Out

... I kept asking and asking to go, and never heard a thing. But this day, which was November 1964—that day that I left the convent, I was working and at 5 o'clock the headmistress called and she said that she wanted to see me. ... She took me in this room. She had this stripy dress; she had this green coat and this hat. And she said, "put them on, we're sending you out to work, but in the meanwhile, we're going to put you in a B&B."

I had never been out of the Convent's sight apart from that hospital week. They put me down in New Ross in this bed and breakfast. This auxiliary comes, and she just said, "you're going to work in Port Ui Uncaile, and you will be put on the train in Waterford and the nuns in Galway will meet you in Limerick."

Going to Galway

... And then the auxiliary came, put me on the train to Waterford. So she said “you sit there until it comes up Limerick and then two nuns will meet you.”

So then two nuns met me, took me to the hospital and obviously they gave us some tea and that. And then took me to where I was going to be working in the nursing home ... where girls were training to be nurses. Again, to do the cleaning and all sorts. But you got all your food there. ... Well was I scared. Oh I thought, “I want to go back.” I thought, “Oh I hate this.” But I settled down after a while, and I started being a little bit more independent. The job was lovely. I was the only one working in that nurses’ home, and it was nice. We were getting paid.

But I wasn’t very confident. It took an awful lot. There was always fear. There was always the doubt—were you good enough? There was always, you know, just putting yourself down.

Going to England

So I was there about 2 years and ... then M___ came and we did a lot of things together. And I started socializing a little bit, asking to go out. And that’s where I met J____.... And I started going out with him. And then he was going to England, and my sister said well why don’t you come over to me?

So I went and I gave my notice in. Oh my god, it was worse than getting out of the convent. “No, you’ll have to ask Father N____. You’ll have to. No you can’t go to England. You can’t. You’d get in trouble. You can’t go to England.”

...So then I had to go before the Reverend Mother. I didn’t change my mind there either. Then, they contacted Father N____. First of all they were going to send me back to the convent. And then they contacted Father N____, and he said “let her go to her sister’s.” But even until that last minute they didn’t want me to go.

But I came, and my sister only lived around the corner. And my brother in law said, “we’ll go up to Tesco’s and see if we can get you a job.” And there was this man from Northern Ireland in there. And he said, “If she wants a job, she’ll come back Monday morning.” That was as easy as that.

And then J___ was in London. ... So we were a year and a half over, and we got married. And three children. ... But J_____ was very supportive.

For a while, I think—yes the reason was we went home to Ireland and his relatives said, “she was in the convent? ... We’ve got loads of them up there, and why did you choose her?” So he said “well you’ve got a choice now. You either accept her, or we won’t come back again.”

What it felt like when I finally got free

To begin with, I was very apprehensive. But when we got our confidence, I was better. I was never that outgoing person... I stayed at home for 12 years and then I got an evening job cleaning at the hospital. I did that for 10 years, and where I worked was mental health. And I loved being kind to those patients. So in the end they were saying to me “why don’t you go and be an auxiliary nurse? You’d be good at it.”

And I said no, no, no! Anyway they pushed me down to the manager’s office. And I did the forms, got the job, and I pushed my problems behind. I just gave everything I could to all of them. And I even got my 25-year plaque. And that was me, that’s how I lived. I gave something to somebody, because they were so vulnerable. There was a lot of Irish there. So I was an auxiliary for 17 years, and I retired 3 years ago. I know because the way the reception I got when I left, I knew I did a good job.

Testimony D

How did you come to be in the Magdalene Laundry?

I was working [in Mater House in Dublin], and this girl had finished with her boyfriend. And I went out with him. Because where I was working, it was nuns as well but they were lovely nuns, they weren't horrible or anything. They were lovely.

And the next thing I knew there was this woman. I knew her – she come to collect me to put me in the pension (penitents). Oh god, I was petrified. Nobody told me nothing. I just have to go there. Oh god I nearly died. It's safe to say that was the most horrible place you could go, because it was like – how do it put it – very low. 'Cause when we were young kids, there was penitents there as well you know, in another part of the convent and we always thought and when I have to go there...

I think really that what this nun thought was that because my mother had two children, maybe they thought that I would follow her footsteps. But I knew the difference between boy and girl, facts of life. My sister told me. Maybe that's what they thought.

...I went in the car. I don't remember, there was this woman that come and took me away. Cos she was sent from Limerick [*Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry*] to pick me up and I didn't know where I was going until I land on the penitents' door.

But who said that going out with a bloke was wrong?

Because I stayed out late with him. Nobody said it was wrong, but this nun rang down to Waterford where I was all them years [*in the Industrial School*]. So then this nun decided I should go to Limerick, that I shouldn't be out. They just sent this woman up and I went in the car and reached Limerick.

And nobody explained to you why you were there or to tell you how long you would be there?

No nothing. You're joking, aren't you. Nobody tells you nothing.

Experience of the laundry – abuse and neglect

I was in there for two years; oh it was wicked. Oh it was wicked, and we were starving... Took me clothes off of me, and put them old rags on me. And they change your name to C___. C___ was my name.

...No I didn't ask nothing. I didn't do nothing. They didn't ask you to do work; they just put you there. Like I say – “you sit there” – they just told you what to do.

I was in the ironing room, and then they put me in the laundry. It was alright... there was nobody there that I could speak to. They wouldn't sit down and talk to you. Because we was kept busy on the machines all the time. It was awful.

I was in there for two years, and I said a prayer that I would be out by the time I was 21. Because I didn't want to be there when I was 21.

The day started with mass, and then breakfast, a cut of bread and then you go straight to the laundry and you do your washing. All the washing comes from the outside and you do that. Then you go to dinner and you come back and you wash again.

Then at night time, oh we didn't go nowhere. You had to go into a circle you know and this woman – I don't know what you call them, consecrated, they would supervise. And if you were talking – say if I was talking to you – the nun wouldn't like it. They would rather you was talking to them. They just didn't like it at all.

We didn't have much contact with anybody. You never looked out the window. You could never talk about anything, just all prayer. You were in church about three times on a Sunday. Another priest would come in and you'd have to go that mass again.

...I was never allowed out in Limerick, never. The doors weren't locked, but you just couldn't get out. ...They weren't telling you not to leave, you couldn't leave. I don't know anybody who ran away in Limerick, because then they bring you back and then you had to kneel down in front of the nun and everyone is sitting there and you have to say you're sorry. But I never did because where would I go? I didn't want to come back and be beaten up again.

... The doors were locked at night time. I never seen them locked but they must have been ...At night time, you sat around – this would be my place and I'd sit around with the group and the consecrated nun, she'd have that group and you'd have sewing. They'd give you clothes to embroider. Then it was time to go to bed and you'd go to bed and that was it.

I used to sit outside the group. I never got involved in the group. You wouldn't talk very often because I just didn't want to. I was just so depressed all the time. Especially when [I wrote to] my mother [and she] said "you stay there for 40 years." And that really got me. And I thought, "how am I going to get out of here now? If she don't want me, nobody wants me."

How did you manage to leave the laundry?

... Out of the blue I had a letter. My grandmother wrote and said she was coming to see me. And that was it. And I was let loose. She took me out. It was lovely. I stayed with her for a while, and then I got a job and I came over to England.

... Anyway, I thought I would get money because I'd been on them machines two years working really hard. And not a penny. This nun come in, and she didn't even say goodbye to me. Not a penny.

I got my clothes back because they take them off you and they put them up in some sort of room. And then the nun said, "are they all your clothes?" And I said "I don't steal."

Experience in the laundry, cont'd.

...It was wicked. As I say, they never hit you in Limerick. But it was really degrading, very upsetting. Never had any privacy.

... When my mother said she wanted me to stay for 40 years, I think the nun in charge – I never liked her anyway – I think she thought, "well I can do what I like now, say what I like to her." Was she mean? No she was just – I just didn't like her. She didn't like me. You see the thing is, even in Waterford [*Industrial School*], I think it's because me and my sister, we had no father. We was sort of, she thought that we were dirty. It's nothing to do with me, do you know what I mean. Even the nun in Waterford thought the same – she was horrible to me.

I don't really remember Christmas. Oh yes, we did go to mass and pray. I prayed so much for someone to come and take me out. Was there a party? You're joking, aren't you.

I had a life that I couldn't sit where I wanted to sit, I couldn't talk to people when I wanted to. All I done was pray. The food was crap. The nun was horrible. Because she looked down on me because I – you know this is what gets me all my life – because we didn't have a father.

Did you ever speak to anyone? Did you ever speak to a priest?

No, because the priest was on the nuns' side, you see. We had to go to confession all the time – don't know what we had to tell. But they were on the nuns' side. Not for us.

Did you ever ask to get out?

I did but they said nothing. They wouldn't take any notice of me anyway. They never bothered with me you know because I was – I felt all the time that I was dirty.

I've never seen anybody to escape really because as I say I worked in the laundry and then we sat in a circle and that was your day. I don't know where was the nearest door you could run out.

All I wanted to do was to try and pray to get out of there, because it was horrible.

The women all dressed in black – I don't know what they're called. [*The Good Shepherds sub-divided the women into three classes—the 'ordinary penitents,' the Children of Mary, and the Magdalene class, also called Auxiliaries*] They're not nuns but they start off with a green ribbon, have you ever heard of them? Of course they kept on at me to have this green ribbon. I wouldn't have it, and everyone was at me to have it, and I thought "if I have the green ribbon I'm here for life". Yes so in the end I had the green ribbon. You have the green ribbon. No, I think it's a mauve one, and then the green with a medal on it. Then you have a big ribbon with Our Lady hanging down. And then you're there for so long that they make you these black ones.

They were all working in the linen room, the ironing room, the laundry and then the sewing room where they made all the lace for outside.

Did you ever refuse to work?

... You couldn't refuse to work, you just have to do it. I mean now, thinking back now, if I had my life all over again, I'd have really gone for them nuns, especially the one in Waterford... But I was frightened. Even now I'm scared.

Did you ever have any visitors?

Nobody ever come to see me, only when my grandmother was taking me out. And when you get letters the nun used to read them all.

Did you ever have to come out to go to hospital or anything?

No. I wish I did!

When you were in the laundry, did you get any education or skill?

Never learned anything, just prayed. They never said "do you want to this, do you want to that, can you read, can you write?" No, nothing.

Did you get to walk on the grounds?

You're joking. No never.

What would you do on a nice summer's day?

There was a field we used to go in.

Did you have a day off?

Yes, you didn't do any work on a Sunday - you prayed. Mass three times. You worked every other day.

Did you learn to embroider?

Yeah, I can do good embroidery.

Horrible life isn't it?

...All I wanted was to get out.

Did you have a radio or?

Crikey, you're joking aren't you. Radio – what's that?

You couldn't talk in the dormitory. You couldn't talk where you had your food...And then when we finished our dinner then we go back to the laundry again, back to work.

To be honest with you, you didn't take much notice of who was there, who was young who was old. You just was there, for penance. That's what I call it, nothing else.

Were you called penitents?

Yeah that's what we used to call. They never told you why you were there. Well I knew why I was in there. They just didn't want you going out with boys.

She thought I was in there for 40 years so she never told me anything. She never give me any penny and was working all those two years slaving away.

How did you feel when you left?

I was as happy as Larry. And once I met him [*her husband*] I thought I'm free, nobody can take me now. Once I came over to England I thought, I'm free, nobody will ever take me now. So I was free.

Did you talk to people about it?

No, it's not something you tell everybody.

...I just sat there hoping that one day God would send someone to take me. And in the end he did.

And the lace you made – would they sell that?

They used to sell that. There was a special room where they used to make the lace and send it out to people.

Did you make any friends in the laundry?

Not really because you couldn't talk to anyone. If this nun saw you talking – really what they wanted you to do - You sat in this group and you talked to them if you wanted to talk. You couldn't get out of that group because that was it.

Did they ever give you books or anything to read, or was it just missals?

I didn't even have a missal. Just go to confession. Well I told the priest one day that I wanted to get out, and he didn't take any notice of me. They were in with the nuns, weren't they?

What do you think of Ireland and the way you were treated?

I don't know. You can't say you hate it just because people were horrible, do you know what I mean? ... I can't put into words how I feel. You see we go over to Ireland and there's people there who can't do enough for us. And we go to a club every Thursday and they say "you're welcome, you're welcome", and with that it makes me feel, well I've been through so much, just someone saying that makes me happy, it really does.

When you wake up in the middle of the night and you're crying and you don't know what you're crying for, it's still there.

... The thing is now – if I was there now and I was 18, I would give them a mouthful. But you don't learn. I was so frightened.

They made the money didn't they – how did they keep the convent going? There was loads of laundry, big sheets of it.

I was going to write to the nun when I left Limerick – to the head nun and ask her why I didn't get paid for working in the laundry. And I thought, "if I do you know they'll try and bring me back again." I just got that feeling.

Husband: "When I first met her, she was 7 stone"

I was anemic.

How's your health now?

It's alright. Except I just get very weepy.