

## Proposed Magdalene Redress Act

*The following is the proposed separate Magdalene Redress Act submitted by Justice for Magdalenes to all politicians in Dáil Éireann on 3 July, 2009, and subsequently submitted to the Departments of Education and Justice.*

### 3I: Aim

### II: Key Terms

### III: State Apology

### IV: State Redress Scheme

#### I: Aim

To establish a distinct Redress scheme for survivors of Ireland's Magdalen Laundries

#### II: Key Terms

Involuntary Committal: Women (typically young girls) transferred to the Magdalen Laundry from State residential institutions, e.g., Industrial and Reformatory School.

**Location:** After the foundation of the State (1922), Laundries operated in Galway and Dun Laoghaire (Mercy), Waterford, New Ross, Limerick, and Cork (Good Shepherds), Donnybrook and Cork (Sisters of Charity), Drumcondra and Gloucester/Sean McDermott Streets (Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge). Bethany House in Dublin operated as a Magdalen institution for members of the Protestant community. The last Magdalen ceased operating as a commercial laundry on October 25, 1996.

**Magdalen Laundry:** Institutions attached to Convents operated by female religious in which incarcerated women, called "penitents," worked at laundry and other for-profit enterprises. These women were denied freedom of movement. They were unpaid for their labor. They were denied their given names. The daily routine emphasized prayer, silence, and work. Women had to be signed out of the Magdalen, and many remained to live, work, and ultimately die, behind convent walls.

**Referred committal:** This category includes women referred to the Magdalen Laundries by the Courts, typically having accepted a suspended sentence upon "voluntarily" agreeing to enter a convent for a specified amount of time. Also, includes women referred to the Magdalen Laundries by the Courts while on remand and awaiting trial (Criminal Justice Act, 1960).

**Religious Congregations:** The Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, Sisters of Charity, Good Shepherd Sisters.

**State:** Government of the Saorstát and later the Republic of Ireland.

**"Voluntary" Committal:** Woman (of any age) deposited at the Magdalen Convent by a family member, employer, social worker, Gardai, local doctor, etc.

### III. Elements of a State Apology

The state apologizes for its failure to protect adequately the constitutional rights of citizens committed to the nation's Magdalen Laundries. The State acknowledges that it failed to protect the Magdalen women's basic human rights (regardless of whether they were committed voluntarily, involuntarily, or referred), rights guaranteed to other citizens.

In particular, the State apologizes to those young women involuntarily committed to the Magdalen Laundries, especially to girls transferred from state-licensed residential institutions directly into the Magdalen Laundries. The State will statutorily guarantee access for these victims of institutional abuse (up to the age of 21 years of age upon committal) in accordance with the Residential Institutions Redress Act (2002) and any subsequent amending legislation.

The state acknowledges that the Magdalen Laundries were punishing and abusive in nature, and that the state failed to insist that these institutions comply with various legislative measures ensuring workers' rights (e.g., a working wage, safe work conditions, hours of work per day and per week, vacation time, etc.).

The state acknowledges that it failed to ensure some measure of regulation and inspection of these institutions, which although owned and operated by Catholic Religious Congregations, were routinely used by the Courts for women found guilty of certain crimes and or for women on remand and awaiting trial. In doing so, the State apologizes to women committed to the Magdalen institutions having been referred through the state's judicial system.

*(cont'd, reverse)*

## Justice for Magdalenes outraged at grave disrespect



*Mecklenburg Street Laundry memorial surrounded by construction*

Justice for Magdalenes has written to Glasnevin cemetery and the Lord Mayor of Dublin demanding the removal of the storage area that has been erected around the Mecklenburg Street Magdalene grave at Glasnevin Cemetery. The organisation has also written to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, who have responsibility for the grave.

Claire McGettrick, Justice for Magdalenes PRO, made the discovery while bringing a group of film students making a documentary about the Laundries to the Magdalene graves in the cemetery. She said, "I was horrified when we arrived at the Mecklenburg Street grave, to see that it had been reduced to a storage area. This grave is of particular importance to us as the women are referred to as 'penitents' and this is one of the many Magdalene graves where none of the women's names are on the gravestone. Now, with the careless erection of this storage area, they are subjected to even further disrespect."

Justice for Magdalenes says it is highly unlikely that a construction firm would erect a similar storage area around the graves of the social and politically prominent. But because these were Magdalene women Irish society again feels empowered to treat them with impunity.

*(cont'd, reverse)*

## ***Proposed Magdalene Redress Act (cont'd)***

The state acknowledges and apologizes for its complicity in the abuse of all women in the Magdalen Laundries by virtue of its ongoing support of the religious congregations operating these institutions, e.g., by providing lucrative contracts of laundry from prisons, hospitals, the military, etc., and by consistently referring a labor force to the laundries via the courts.

Finally, the state urges the four religious congregations directly involved in operating the laundry institutions, the Catholic hierarchy who oversaw the congregations, and the families of those women committed to the Magdalen Laundries, to issue their respective apologies for the abuse, mistreatment, and abandonment of these women.

### **IV: Elements of a State Redress Scheme for Victims and Survivors of the Magdalen Laundries**

The nature of the State's relationship to the Magdalen Laundries was different to that of the so-called residential institutions. At no time did the State license, regulate or inspect the Magdalen Laundries. Oversight and management always remained in the hands of the religious congregations and the local members of the Catholic hierarchy. The Laundry enterprise, and related enterprises, was always operated on a for-profit basis. But because of the charitable status of the enterprise these laundry institutions were exempt from certain provisions of the Companies and Factory Acts.

Despite these differences in the nature of its relationship to the Magdalen Laundries, the State recognizes its historic failure to intervene and adequately protect the women in these institutions by supporting the following measures:

- The State will make available through appropriate means all available records for women committed to the Magdalen Laundries (voluntarily, involuntarily, referred) and ensure access to such records by family members seeking to trace their family history. The State encourages the Religious Congregations to make available their records as part of the same scheme. In particular, the State commits to work with Adoption Support Network of Ireland (ASNI) and similar agencies to facilitate search and reunion of family members directly impacted by the Magdalen Laundries.
- The State will sponsor an oral history project to record and archive the experiences of women committed to the Magdalen Laundries as well as members of the religious congregations and other parties interested in participating.
- The State recognizes that due to recent property development and financial concerns on the part of the religious congregations, the buildings of the former Magdalen Laundries are quickly disappearing. The State will fund an appropriate national memorial to commemorate the Magdalen Laundries and the women confined therein. In doing so the State is committed to protect against the erasure of this chapter in the nation's history.
- The State will fund the upkeep and maintenance of Magdalen burial plots, and will work with the religious orders to erect suitable memorial stones, as well as to ensure the complete accuracy of such memorials. The State will amend language on burial memorial stones which refer to the Magdalens as "penitents," "residents," "sinners," etc.
- The State will conduct a criminal investigation of the exhumation of human remains from the burial plot at High Park Magdalen Laundry in Drumcondra to determine precise details related to the additional sets of human remains discovered and the irregularities related to missing death certificates for those involved. It will likewise demand information from the religious congregations related to similar exhumations in Galway, and at other convents housing former Magdalen Laundries.
- The State commits to re-examine legislation (e.g., The Factory Acts, Companies Act, Charities Act, Adoption Acts, Redress Acts, Criminal Justice Acts, etc.) to ensure that they comply with the proposed Magdalene Survivors Redress Scheme.

## ***Grave Disrespect (cont'd)***

Professor James Smith, author of Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment, said, "These women were treated with little dignity in life and now they are afforded no dignity in death. Using the sacred space of the gravesite as a construction site storage facility signals the complete disregard for these women's rights and nobody should have their memory disregarded in this manner."

Justice for Magdalenes asserts that this type of mistreatment is completely unacceptable. What has happened at Glasnevin Cemetery demonstrates the tendency to forget and disregard Magdalene women, like the Irish government has disregarded them by refusing to set up a Redress Scheme to compensate them for the abuse they endured.

Photos of the grave, before and after are available online at <http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/mecklenburgh.htm> and can be obtained by emailing [info@magdalenelaundries.com](mailto:info@magdalenelaundries.com).

## **Calling all survivors and families!**

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

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

Distribute this newsletter to anyone you know affected by the Magdalene Laundries. We would also like to begin collecting oral histories of survivors, so if you know someone willing to share their story, please let us know.