

**PRESS RELEASE**  
**21<sup>st</sup> January 2010**

**Justice for Magdalenes views 19<sup>th</sup> January Parliamentary Questions with mixed emotions**

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) acknowledges with thanks the work of Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D. (Labour Party), in tabling a series of Parliamentary Questions in Dáil Éireann on 19<sup>th</sup> January.

**The Minister for Education, Mr. Batt O'Keeffe T.D. (Question 1028)**

JFM maintains that the Minister for Education, Mr. O'Keeffe, is disingenuous in his explanation as to why officials from his department did not attend a scheduled meeting with JFM on 14 December 2009

JFM wrote to the Minister on 25 November 2009 requesting a meeting and informing him of the two-day window when such a meeting was possible. A meeting was scheduled for 14 December 2009. The official from Education did not attend. The following day the official contacted JFM and explained his non-attendance in terms of a "diary mix-up." The JFM representative offered to meet him or any official in the Department of Education on the evening of 15 December 2009. He also offered to meet the following morning (16 December 2009) at any Dublin-based location prior to travelling back to the United States later that afternoon. Neither offer was taken up. Furthermore, the JFM representative was asked for and provided his email and phone numbers in the United States and was assured that someone in the Department of Education would contact him by week's end. That did not happen.

In light of these events, JFM wrote again to the Minister for Education on 22 December 2009 and resubmitted evidence of the Department's awareness that children, other than those transferred directly from a state Residential Institution, were being confined in Magdalene Laundries as late as 1970. The Minister has not responded to this letter. Nor has the Minister responded to the earlier letter written to An Taoiseach on 22 September 2009 and transferred to the Minister's office on 18 October 2009.

While JFM appreciates Mr. O'Keeffe's offer of a meeting with officials in the Department of Education at some future unspecified date, the fact remains that the majority of Magdalene survivors are elderly and need assistance now. This process of redress can only begin once Mr. O'Keeffe retracts his statement that the "state did not refer individuals nor was it complicity in referring individuals to the laundries" (4 September 2009). Moreover, coordinating committee members of JFM are on the ground in Ireland and certainly able to meet with representatives of the Department of Education. Mr. O'Keeffe's reply would indicate his office was only prepared to meet with one of JFM's U.S. members. If Minister O'Keeffe's 'offer remains open,' will he now contact JFM's local Irish members?

**The Minister for Justice, Mr. Dermot Ahern T.D. (Questions 547-550)**

JFM does acknowledge that the Department of Justice is continuing its own research into many of the issues raised at that meeting. However, there are a number of concerns over statements made by Minister Ahern in the Dáil yesterday.

The Minister for Justice's response to Question 547 underscores as fact that women were placed "On Remand" at the St. Mary Magdalen Asylum, Sean McDermott Street, Dublin, after the passage of the Criminal Justice Act, 1960. The State did pay a capitation grant for these women. These women may well have been "visited from time to time by a Probation Officer and by the Superintendent of Prisons," in accordance with the 1947 Prisons Rules Part III, but it is also a fact that the institution in question was never inspected or regulated by the State. In light of this admission, JFM points out that the Department of Justice placed women "On Remand" in an institution beyond direct State control.

The question of the availability of records is central to each of the Minister's four responses. JFM questions why the records for Our Lady's Home, Henrietta Street "have been located" while the records for precisely the same category of women "On Remand" at St. Mary Magdalen Asylum are unavailable or incomplete? The religious orders retain records for every woman entering a Magdalene Laundry. At the 14<sup>th</sup> December meeting, JFM

requested that the Department of Justice solicit records for all women referred to the laundries by the State, either directly by the Department of Justice or indirectly via the courts. Is the Minister for Justice unwilling to pursue this request on behalf of survivors of the Magdalene Laundries?

In his response to Question 548, Minister Ahern states that the practice whereby courts detained women to a Magdalene laundry predates the foundation of the State. JFM has documented, as the Department of Justice is well aware, that this practice continued well into the 1960s. Again, at the 14<sup>th</sup> December meeting, Dr. James Smith (Boston College) submitted evidence of 54 women sent to Catholic Magdalene Laundries upon receiving suspended sentences, 26 women sent to Our Lady's Home, Henrietta Street, and a further 4 women sent to the Bethany Home between the years 1926-1963. He also submitted evidence from March 1944 for an additional 29 women placed "On Probation" in eight different religious institutions (including five different Magdalene laundries). The typical sentence in such cases ran anywhere from 1 to 3 years,. In the absence of records for these women it remains possible, even likely, that some women remained confined in the institution for life. In either case, the Minister for Justice's acknowledging this practice of court detainees contradicts the Minister for Education's statement that the State did not refer individuals to the laundries. Consequently JFM again repeats its request that Minister O'Keeffe retract his earlier statement.

In his response to Question 548, Minister Ahern acknowledges that there was "no statutory power for a court to sentence a person to be detained in a Magdalen laundry," and that the State was aware of this fact as early as the so-called Cussen Report (1934-1936). In light of this statement, JFM again asks why then the practice continued well into the 1960s?

The Minister also asserts that the "records of such orders are court orders" and that "these orders/arrangements were made by the courts without reference to any Department or State." JFM recognizes this response as one motivated by limiting potential State liability rather than securing justice and redress for Magdalene survivors. Surely Ireland's Minister for Justice has an obligation to the victims and survivors of unjust incarceration to obtain legal redress as well as access to their records. Given the judicial system's participation in a practice with no statutory basis, liability in this regard will ultimately entail the Department of Justice.

In his responses to questions 549 and 550, the Minister states that his department does not possess "records that would indicate the number of women who were sent to the Magdalen Laundries since the foundation of the State." JFM challenges the Minister on his assertion and ask why not? At the very least, the Department must assume responsibility for making available records for women detained in the laundries by the courts upon obtaining a suspended sentence, for women placed "On Probation" and "On Remand." JFM challenges the Department, and other government Departments complicit in referring women to these institutions, to insist that the four religious congregations make available records for these women.

After the publication of the Dublin Archdiocese (Murphy) Report, Minister Dermot Ahern announced that "a collar will protect no criminal." He should now back up that commitment by doing everything within his power as a government minister to obtain all records for all women confined in Ireland's Magdalene laundries.

[ENDS]

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