

Chapter 19:

Living and working conditions

Summary:

This Chapter records the memories of the living and working conditions in the Magdalen Laundries as shared with the Committee by the women who were admitted there. Although this Chapter identifies a number of patterns among the stories shared with it, the Committee did not make specific findings in relation to this issue, in light of the small sample of women available.

These women, to a large extent, have not previously had the opportunity to share their memories and experiences.

This Chapter also records the experiences shared with the Committee by others with direct experience of the Magdalen Laundries, including:

- *some members of the Religious Congregations who operated the Laundries;*
- *General medical practitioners who served as GPs to the Laundries;*
- *a priest who served as Chaplain to a Magdalen Laundry;*
- *two retired Probation Officers;*
- *a person who served as manager of a Magdalen Laundry for 6 years;*
- *a woman who spent a week as a novice at a Magdalen Laundry during the 1950s; and*
- *a small number of people who periodically visited two Magdalen Laundries as part of the activities of a club from the 1960s onwards.*

The majority of the women who engaged with the Committee had been at Reformatory or Industrial Schools prior to their admission to a Magdalen Laundry. They made a clear distinction between some of the practices in Industrial and Reformatory Schools and the Magdalen Laundries, particularly in relation to physical punishment and abuse.

Introduction

1. The question of the conditions experienced by the girls and women who lived and worked in the Magdalen Laundries has been one of public concern for some time. This is a particularly sensitive issue.
2. There has been very little direct information in the public domain on this issue, principally because the women concerned have generally either had no opportunity to share their experiences, or have felt unable to do so due to a continuing fear of stigma or judgement. Additionally, the Religious Orders which operated the Magdalen Laundries have not made any public comment on the matter.
3. Consequently, this absence of direct information about the living and working conditions within the Magdalen Laundries has been largely replaced by historical (pre-State) experience and fictional writings or representations. It is also likely that assumptions have been made regarding these institutions based on the evidence of the grievous abuse suffered by male and female children in Industrial and Reformatory Schools in Ireland throughout the twentieth century.
4. The Committee, in the course of its work, met with a number of people who had direct experience of the Magdalen Laundries - that is, some of the women who lived and worked there, the Sisters of the Religious Orders who operated the Laundries, and others closely associated or holding direct experience of the operation of the Laundries.
5. These people provided the Committee with a range of information relating to the Magdalen Laundries, including information on the conditions they experienced or observed there.
6. The Committee considered that it would be in the public interest to disclose this information, while protecting the privacy of all the women who spent time

in the Magdalen Laundries. Where information was supplied to the Committee by these women it is summarised in anonymised form.

7. This Chapter relies mainly on the stories shared with the Committee by the women themselves who lived and worked in the Magdalen Laundries. As the most direct source of experience, the stories they shared with the Committee provided invaluable insights into the operation of the Laundries. The Committee wishes to acknowledge the courage and generosity which these women demonstrated through their willingness to contribute to the work of the Committee by disclosing some very personal, often difficult and intimate details of their lives both inside and outside the Magdalen Laundries.
8. The Congregations which operated the Magdalen Laundries also engaged in an exercise of gathering what memories they could from older members of their Communities. Their reflections on the operation of the Magdalen Laundries are also recorded in this Chapter.
9. This Chapter also includes information drawn from extensive conversations with others with direct experience of the Magdalen Laundries. The full list of those who provided information to the Committee in relation to this matter is as follows:
 - A. The women who were admitted to and worked in the Magdalen Laundries;
 - B. Reflections of the Religious Congregations;
 - C. Recollections of General Practitioners;
 - D. John Kennedy, Manager of the Laundry at Limerick 1976-1982;
 - E. Patricia Burke Brogan, novice at Galway Laundry for a week in the 1950s;
 - F. Two retired Probation Officers;
 - G. Chaplain at Sean McDermott Street Laundry;
 - H. Summary by Sally Mulready and Phyllis Morgan;
 - I. Dublin Lions Club;

10. The Committee reviewed other relevant written sources, including the Report of the Commission to inquire into Child Abuse (“the Ryan Report”).
11. The Committee also considered certain other materials in the public domain, including some comments attributed to women who at various times lived and worked in the Magdalen Laundries but who were not available to engage with the Committee. Examination of these materials and comments against the primary written records of the Religious Congregations revealed contradictions which were, in some cases, difficult to reconcile.
12. This Chapter records the memories of the living and working conditions in the Magdalen Laundries shared with the Committee by all the above. Although identifying common patterns in those stories, the Committee did not make specific findings on these points, in view of the small sample of women and others available with direct experience of the Magdalen Laundries.

A. The stories of women who lived and worked in the Magdalen Laundries

13. The Committee conducted a series of meetings with a number of women who spent time in the Magdalen Laundries.
14. In all cases, the first meeting consisted of an opportunity for the women concerned to tell their story in a natural and unprompted way. Subsequent meetings afforded the Committee an opportunity to seek clarifications on areas of particular interest. In addition to these meetings, the women were given an opportunity to submit information in writing.
15. The Committee believes that this process enabled it to gain a greater understanding of a number of significant issues in relation to the Magdalen Laundries. Information provided by many of the women through this process included a clear distinction between some of the practices in industrial and reformatory schools and the Magdalen Laundries, in particular in relation to practices of physical punishment and abuse. These meetings accordingly

enabled the Committee to express this distinction, where up to now there may have been confusion in public analysis.

16. A total of 118 women who had lived and worked in at least one Magdalen Laundry came forward and engaged with the Committee. The women who shared their stories with the Committee included:

- 31 women represented by the Irish Women's Survivor's Network (UK);
- 15 women represented by Magdalene Survivors Together;
- 7 women introduced to the Committee by the Advocacy Group Justice for Magdalenes;
- 7 women who made contact directly, on their own behalf, with the Committee; and
- 58 women currently living in nursing homes or sheltered accommodation under the care of the Religious Orders.

17. An additional 10 women represented by Magdalene Survivors Together, who had spent time in other institutions including in particular St Mary's Laundry, Stanhope Street, also shared their stories with the Committee. As set out in Chapter 3, this was not one of the 10 institutions within the Committee's remit and the Committee did not have discretion to add it to its mandate. The Committee did, however, agree to meet with the women concerned as part of their representative group and to hear their stories as part of the overall context of its work. In the majority of these cases, the women entered Stanhope Street through placement by their families, following recommendations variously by teachers, neighbours and others.

18. A number of family members of women who had been in Magdalen Laundries were also introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes.

19. The Committee is fully aware that there are many other women who have not felt able to share their experience of the Magdalen Laundries with it, or indeed with anyone.
20. Because the total number of women who provided direct information to the Committee was limited to a small proportion of all those who spent time in a Magdalen Laundry and as the sample was not randomly selected, it cannot be considered representative. Given passage of time, it is also clear that the sample is biased towards more modern years – the 1940s was the earliest period for which the Committee had access to the direct experience of women who spent time in the Magdalen Laundries.
21. The Committee would also note that it did not have the power to make findings of fact in relation to individual cases. Nonetheless, the following stories and experiences are included in the Report, as they were told to the Committee and as the people concerned remember them.

Routes of entry to the Magdalen Laundries for the women who met the Committee

22. The women who engaged with the Committee were admitted to Magdalen Laundries in a variety of ways. The majority of the women had previously been committed to Industrial or Reformatory Schools. In some of these cases, the women referred to the involvement of the Legion of Mary or the NSPCC ('cruelty man').
23. A smaller number of women who met the Committee had been placed in Magdalen Laundries by members of their families, including one case involving placement by a foster-family and/or the local health authorities, and one case involving placement by family members and a priest.
24. One woman had entered a Magdalen Laundry after the birth of a child outside marriage.

25. No women admitted to Magdalen Laundries by any of the other routes of entry detailed in Part III (namely County and City Homes, Prison, Remand and Probation or psychiatric hospitals), came forward to describe the circumstances of their admission to or their experience of living and working there.
26. The majority of the women who engaged with the Committee were admitted to Magdalen Laundries following time in an Industrial School. Chapter 10 of this Report sets out the circumstances in which some former young women were placed in a Magdalen Laundry during the period of their supervision after discharge from Industrial School. It appears to the Committee that, for many of the women it met, these were the circumstances in which they came to enter a Magdalen Laundry.
27. None of these women were aware that a period of supervision followed their discharge from an Industrial or Reformatory School or that they were liable to recall during that period. None of them recall being told this either at the time of their discharge from School or at any time during the supervision period.
28. The confusion and hurt experienced by these women when placed in a Magdalen Laundry was, undoubtedly, exacerbated by the fact that they had absolutely no idea why they were there. For many of them, this also meant that on leaving the Magdalen Laundry, they were fearful that, for some unknown reason, they might be brought back there again. Some of the women told the Committee that they felt free of this fear only after they left Ireland to live abroad.
29. The information provided to the Committee by these women is summarised, under the following headings:
- i. Sexual abuse
 - ii. Physical abuse
 - iii. Psychological and verbal abuse and non-physical punishment
 - iv. Work environment

- v. Reports of hair cutting
- vi. Communication with the outside world - letters and visitors
- vii. Lack of information and a real fear of remaining there until death
- viii. Recreation
- ix. Manner of leaving

30. In all cases, the quotes that follow are taken from women with whom the Committee met who had, in their earlier lives, been admitted to and worked in a Magdalen Laundry.

i. Sexual abuse

31. One woman told the Committee that she was subjected to sexual abuse by an auxiliary during her time in a Magdalen Laundry. She was not aware of this happening to anyone else. Auxiliaries, referred to variously as “consecrates” or “magdalenes”, were women who, having entered a Magdalen Laundry, decided to remain there for life.

32. No other women in contact with the Committee made any allegation of sexual abuse during their time in the Magdalen Laundries. However a significant number told the Committee that they had suffered sexual abuse in the family home or in other institutions, either before or after their time in the Magdalen Laundries.

ii. Physical abuse

33. A large majority of the women who shared their stories with the Committee said that they had neither experienced nor seen other girls or women suffer physical abuse in the Magdalen Laundries.

34. In this regard, women who had in their earlier lives been in an industrial or reformatory school drew a clear distinction between their experiences there and in the Magdalen Laundries, stating clearly that the widespread brutality which they had witnessed and been subjected to in industrial and reformatory schools was not a feature of the Magdalen Laundries.

35. The following examples and quotations relate to the majority of women who shared their stories with the Committee and who indicated that they had never experienced or seen physical punishment in a Magdalen Laundry:

- One woman summarised her treatment in a Magdalen Laundry by saying “I might have been given out to, but I was never beaten”.¹
- Another woman said about the same Magdalen Laundry “I was never beaten and I never seen anyone beaten”.²
- Another woman said “It has shocked me to read in papers that we were beat and our heads shaved and that we were badly treated by the nuns. As long as I was there, I was not touched myself by any nun and I never saw anyone touched and there was never a finger put on them. ... Now everything was not rosy in there because we were kept against our will ... we worked very hard there ... But in saying that we were treated good and well looked after”.³
- Another woman, in response to a question about whether she had suffered corporal punishment at the Magdalen Laundry, said “no, mind you, thank god” and that neither had she seen others hit.⁴
- A different woman who spent time in the same Magdalen Laundry said “I don’t ever remember anyone being beaten but we did have to work very hard”. She described the manner in which women would protest – “If we were down and out, we’d go on the wren”. She described this as sitting on the stairs and refusing to work.⁵
- Another woman at a different Magdalen Laundry said she was “not beaten, no-one would”. There were other punishments for

¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

² Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

³ Woman not part of any formal group who made direct contact with the Committee

⁴ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

⁵ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

misbehaviour – “you were punished – put to bed without your supper, things like that”.⁶

- A woman at that same Magdalen Laundry when asked if there had been any physical punishments or beatings said “No, they never hit you in the laundry. They never hit me, but the nun looked down on me ‘cause I had no father”.⁷
- A woman at another Magdalen Laundry said that “they might rap your knuckles with theirs, that’d be it”.⁸
- Another woman, who was at a Magdalen Laundry for periods in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s told the Committee “I have lovely scars from the orphanage ... I was never hit in [name of Laundry]. The nuns never hit me in [name of Laundry], I’ll give that to them. But they gave it to you in your mind”. She added “I hit one of the nuns once with a stick from the laundry”.⁹
- A woman who was at a different Magdalen Laundry said “they’d poke you with pointer but they didn’t lash out”.¹⁰
- A woman at the same Magdalen Laundry said “I wasn’t beaten but they’d shake you. And we were hungry – bread and dripping”.¹¹
- Another woman said “I don’t ever remember anyone being beaten but we did have to work very hard. We were robbed of our childhood, but then, I had a mother that beat the crap out of me”.¹²

⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁸ Woman living in sheltered accommodation

⁹ Woman represented by both Irish Womens Survivors Network and Justice for Magdalenes

¹⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹² Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

- Another woman described the difference between her experience of industrial school and the Magdalen Laundry “In the industrial school it was weapons, it was desperate. It wasn’t the same in the Laundry and I never remember being hit with a weapon”.¹³
- A woman who spent time in 3 different Magdalen Laundries summarised the treatment she had received as follows: “No beatings, only working. Hardest work ever”.¹⁴
- Another woman, who had been in two Magdalen Laundries described the physical punishment she suffered in industrial school as “desperate”. She categorised her treatment in the Magdalen Laundries as “mental cruelty”. Regarding that time, she said that the nuns were “very cruel, but they couldn’t hit us ... physical cruelty didn’t happen, but mental cruelty did”.¹⁵
- A woman who had been in a different Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s, when asked about any physical punishment said “no, we were just mass, breakfast, silence, mass again, then work in the laundry”.¹⁶
- A different woman who was in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1940s and 1950s said “I never saw any of the women and girls living with me being ill treated or severely punished in any way, no beatings, no head shaving, no denial of food, my only complain was that of being kept there for no reason. ... Many many more would say the same”.¹⁷
- Another woman described the difference between Magdalen Laundries and industrial schools as “... a big difference. A very big difference”. She said that at the Magdalen Laundries “there was no physical

¹³ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹⁴ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹⁷ Woman not represented by any group but having made direct contact with the Committee

punishment, it was all mental really. We were never hit. I think they were afraid to hit us. I would hit back". She also reported that women would in protest "go up to sit on the stairs, we went to Coventry, went and sat on the stairs and not do any work". The punishment for this would be that the woman would "not be let in for evening meal". This "could go on a whole week, we were able to endure it because our friends brought us the food ... we were too crafty for them, they were praying the whole time ... some girls would stay there in the evening too in the dark, with no recreation".¹⁸

- Another woman at a different Magdalen Laundry when asked if she had ever suffered physical or corporal punishment, said "no, no, not that. But it was just this big building and laundry and I had a terrible childhood and then I was grieving over [specified bereavement]".¹⁹

36. A small number of women described physical punishment on at least one occasion.

- One woman described suffering a physical assault at the hands of 2 auxiliaries on the day of her entry to a Magdalen Laundry. She said that on arrival to the Magdalen Laundry:

"two ladies were standing there, not nuns but dressed in navy. I was left with those two"; and after being made to remove her clothing and stand on a stool, she described being "punched by one of them, one side to another. I was dizzy, I kept saying I'm dizzy".

She described the following morning as follows:

"I had to line up with the rest of the Magdalens for prayers, church, breakfast. A nun sitting on a high chair told the '3 new penitents to say your name'. I saw they were bruised too. I never ever saw another one, just that one time, never anything

¹⁸ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

¹⁹ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

like that again. They would raise voices more than anything – not hands”.²⁰

- Another woman described physical contact on more than one occasion. Regarding her time in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s, she said:

“If you were talking you used to get a slap with a stick get on with work. It could be a nun or a woman who was there a long time ... if you were whispering the bigger girls might push you or pull your hair”.²¹

- Another woman provided the following description of her experience of physical abuse at a Magdalen Laundry. She said that there were only two nuns in the Laundry, one “used to sit and watch over all the girls and there was another down the bottom floor checking it”. She said:

“I never saw a cane. There was a nun with a thick stick but she’d dig it at you. I never seen her draw it and hit anyone. They’d dig you with the cross too. And they used to pull their hair and box their face”.²²

iii. Psychological and verbal abuse and non-physical punishment

37. The overwhelming majority of the women who spoke to the Committee described verbal abuse and being the victim of unkind or hurtful taunting and belittling comments. Even those who said that some Sisters were kind to them reported verbal cruelty as occurring during their time in the Magdalen Laundries.

²⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

²¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

²² Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

- One woman spoke of receiving “cruel talk”.²³
- Another woman at a different Magdalen Laundry said she remembered hurtful comments “I remember a nun telling me that you came from an illegitimate mother. I suppose it was that you were no good and that’s why we were there”.²⁴
- Another woman also spoke of her family background as being unkindly referred to - she said that “the nuns looked down on me ‘cause I had no father”.²⁵
- Another woman in that same laundry said “we were never happy. You were lonely”. She described how, on the journey to the Laundry, “in the car the nuns were saying I had the devil in me, shaking holy water and saying the rosary in the car”. She had been raised in an industrial school with no known family and also described how a Sister on her entry to the Laundry, in front of all the other women, said “tell them where you were brought up and reared”.²⁶
- Another woman, who was in a number of Magdalen Laundries, said that in one of these Laundries the Sisters would make cruel comments about her family background, such as “what do you think you are, I heard all about your family”. This was particularly hurtful to the woman concerned as she said that “my father interfered with the bigger girls”.²⁷
- Another woman said that “conditions were bad now ... one nun took me under her wing and a lovely woman she was, she was good to me”.²⁸

²³ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

²⁴ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

²⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

²⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

²⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

²⁸ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

- Another woman at the same Magdalen Laundry said “the nuns were very nasty. They’d say ‘your father is a drunkard’ in front of everyone. It would degrade me. You know everyone knows your business”.²⁹
- Another woman said “They were very very cruel verbally- ‘your mother doesn’t want you, why do you think you’re here’ and things like that”.³⁰

38. The types of non-physical punishments reported by the women to the Committee varied.

- A woman reported that, after running away from a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s and being returned by the Gardaí, she was “put in isolation for two days”.³¹
- A woman at a different Magdalen Laundry said “I broke a cup once and she put a string on it and I had to wear it for 3 days and 3 nights. And I threw a hanger one time and she made me wear it 3 days and 3 nights”.³²
- Another woman who had been in two Magdalen Laundries reported that, in one of these Laundries, “there was a padded cell, I was put in there 3 times”. In the other Laundry, she was “told if I didn’t work there’d be no food and the infirmary”. Apart from that, punishment was “not let you write to anyone”. In neither of the Laundries did she experience physical punishment - she said of one of the Laundries “they were very cruel but they couldn’t hit us”, and of the other “physical cruelty didn’t happen but mental cruelty did”.³³

²⁹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

³⁰ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

³¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

³² Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

³³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

- A woman at a different Magdalen Laundry reported that the punishment she saw was “they would make you walk in front of all the women in the refectory and lie on the ground and kiss the floor”.³⁴
- Another woman said that as a young girl she moved an item of clothing (a bra) from the laundry. She said “I was made an example of next day. She called my name at dinnertime. You’d be mortified. She said ‘you took a brassiere out of the laundry’, ‘yes I wanted to be like the other girls’. Didn’t she make me kneel there for two hours”.³⁵
- Another woman said that, during her time in a Magdalen Laundry, she began to wet the bed. She said that “they pinned the sheet to me back and I was walking on the veranda with it”.³⁶

iv. Work environment

39. The women who met the Committee were at one regarding their memories of the work which they carried out in the Magdalen Laundries. They described harsh and physically demanding work, in some cases for long hours. Some of them were only young girls while carrying out this heavy and difficult work.

- One woman recalled that she “only saw nuns and hard work. I was soaking wet in the washing machine, the plastic apron was full of holes”. She also said that “In the evening you’d be tired but only the Child of Mary could go to bed after tea, the rest would sit in circle with their circle of consecrates and sew”.³⁷
- Another woman who was at 3 different Magdalen Laundries described that at one of these Laundries she was “so short I needed a stool to put

³⁴ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

³⁵ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

³⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

³⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

washing in. One day I fell in and the lid snapped down, I screamed to get out".³⁸

- A woman at another Magdalen Laundry said that the Sisters "didn't put me working for a week. I was in the sewing room, I was left in there with them looking after me for a week". She said that after that she "went to work in the packing room. I was about 14 years old. You would get up very early, the van men brought it in. You'd check the customer of the dirty laundry, mark it and put it in baskets. You'd pack it in bags and collect them. We had to leave the room when the van men came. It was repetition all the time". She described that sometimes the women would protest by "sitting on the stairs or walking up and down the veranda. You would get told off then".³⁹
- A woman who entered a Magdalen Laundry following an earlier time in an industrial school said it was "very hard work. At about 8 o'clock you'd really drop. You'd be soaking wet. I only think I loved the clothes horses, 'cause it was warm in the drying room". She also said that she was "never allowed talk. If you were caught you'd be moved to other end of laundry".⁴⁰
- A woman said she had been sent to a Magdalen Laundry at a young age by her family. She described her work environment by saying "I needed a footstool 'cause I was too small for the callendar. You couldn't speak and needed permission for the toilet. ... The recreation time you were making beads and aran sweaters".⁴¹
- Another woman said "The only thing was I had appendicitis and asked [named nun] could I go to bed and she wouldn't let me".⁴²

³⁸ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

³⁹ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

⁴⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

⁴¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁴² Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

- Another woman described her experience of working in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1960s by saying “It was very hard work in the Laundry. The roof was all glass, the heat was unbelievable. You couldn’t leave your station unless a bell went. In the workroom I was trained to sew, we made fantastic stuff for the outside- kids clothes, first communion clothes, priests vestments ... there was a sale of work in November for 3 days and the public came in”. She said “If we were down and out we’d go on the wren. I don’t ever remember anyone being beaten but we did have to work very hard”.⁴³
- A different woman said “We used to work hard that way. I would prefer I hadn’t been there, I was worried about my name, but I suppose ... I think myself they put us where we are today”.⁴⁴
- A woman said that you would have to work “unless you were really ill and see the doctor and you couldn’t move”.⁴⁵
- Another woman described the structure of the day. “It was regimented. At the Laundry it was constant, you had to get up at a certain time, have this kind of breakfast, we all had our own sections, then scrub ... As time went by it was so regimental you learned not to ask questions or complain. You couldn’t be forward in any way. Talking was a thing that was seen as sinful”.⁴⁶
- A woman indicated that she had spent 3 weeks in the laundry but was then moved to “the sewing room. I was one of the privileged ones”. She said the Magdalen Laundry she was in had an infirmary, but that

⁴³ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁴⁴ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁴⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁴⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

“you had to be almost bed bound to get in there. [Named auxiliary] did the looking after there, she was alright”.⁴⁷

- One woman described her experience succinctly as “laundry and prayer, laundry and prayer”.⁴⁸
- Another woman said that “you’d have to handle all that dirty laundry and you could’ve picked up anything. They started to pay us a pound a month. And they did try to educate a few of us, a teacher came in, she was a lovely woman”.⁴⁹

40. Some of the women who spoke to the Committee said that the Sisters worked alongside them in the Laundry, while others said that they did not.

- One woman said that “a nun in the packing room did the public’s sewing for them on my behalf”. But that the other nuns “they did very little work in the laundry, round with their beads praying”.⁵⁰
- Another woman who was at the same Magdalen Laundry said “I never saw the nuns working only giving orders”.⁵¹
- By contrast, a woman who was in a different Magdalen Laundry from the 1940s onwards said “Nuns worked with the women, mind you, I’ll give them that”.⁵²
- A woman at a different Magdalen Laundry also reported the Sisters working in the Laundry with the women. She said “I couldn’t believe

⁴⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁴⁸ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁴⁹ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

⁵⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁵¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁵² Woman represented by both Irish Womens Survivors Network and Justice for Magdalenes

nuns worked with you, it was humbling. The nuns were charitable and they worked with us, there was no-one on a throne".⁵³

- Another woman at a different laundry reported that "the nuns worked as well".⁵⁴

v. *Reports of hair cutting*

41. None of the women told the Committee that their heads had been shaved, with one exception. The exception occurred where one woman had her head shaved because she had lice:

- "When I said it was all itchy they shaved it ... If you got lice your head was shaved". In response to a question on whether hair was ever shaved as a punishment, she replied "Just for the lice".⁵⁵

42. Some, but not all women reported that their hair had been cut on entry to the laundry. Some described this as an upsetting and degrading experience.

- One woman, in response to a question on whether her hair was cut on entry to a Magdalen Laundry answered "no, my hair was short".⁵⁶
- Another woman described her hair being cut and described the effect on her as follows "t'was the ultimate humiliation for you. It changed me as a person to authority, God forgive me I learned to hate people then".⁵⁷
- Another woman in response to the same question said "in School oh God yes I got it. In the Laundry, no I didn't".⁵⁸

⁵³ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

⁵⁴ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

⁵⁵ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁵⁶ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁵⁷ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

⁵⁸ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

- Another woman, when asked if her hair was cut on entry to a different Magdalen Laundry, said “no, my hair was short, I had bobbed hair”.⁵⁹
- Another woman described that on entry to the Magdalen Laundry she had long styled hair, which was cut on her first day “It was cut like a pot, like a saucepan on your head. Then they gave you a clip and you had to put the clip in your hair. No one had long hair”.⁶⁰
- One woman said that she had long hair which was cut on her first day at the laundry, “they didn’t shave it but they’d chop it with a shears”. She said it happened only on the day she entered the Laundry.⁶¹
- Another woman also reported having her hair cut on entry to a Magdalen laundry. She said “If you had long hair it was cut, you were not allowed to have long hair. It didn’t happen after”. She described the effect of this also: “It was cut up to my ears. It was humiliating, making us feel like less of a person”.⁶²
- A different woman similarly described having her hair cut upon entry to a Magdalen Laundry. She said “They cut the hair, they cut it up in a bob”. In response to a question on whether her hair was ever cut after her first day or as a punishment, she said “oh no not for punishment, there was never anything done for me for punishment”.⁶³
- Another woman said that her hair had not been cut “they didn’t cut my hair ... it was to my shoulders not long like [name of other woman]”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

⁶⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁶¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁶² Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁶³ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁶⁴ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

- Another woman who entered a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s said “I had lovely long hair. They cut my hair short when I arrived in. They cut my hair and called me [specified name]”.⁶⁵
- Another woman who was in a different Magdalen Laundry also reported that her hair was cut on her first day there “Click click the scissors. The first day but never afterwards. My hair was cut as punishment in the [Industrial] School but not there”.⁶⁶
- Another woman, in response to a question on whether her hair had ever been cut in the Magdalen Laundry said “no, my hair was short”.⁶⁷
- One woman who was in 3 Magdalen Laundries said that in one of those Laundries she was told her hair would be cut but before that could happen “I cut off all my own plait and tied it with a band and kept it”.⁶⁸
- Another woman at a different Magdalen Laundry summarised it by saying “My hair was cut short, not shaved just short”.⁶⁹
- A different woman at another Magdalen Laundry said that her hair had been cut and shaved in an Industrial School, but that in the Magdalen Laundry “nothing like that happened to me”.⁷⁰
- Another woman described having had her hair cut while in Reformatory School, but said this was not repeated in the laundry “oh no, not that I saw, there was definitely a difference”.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁶⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁶⁷ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁶⁸ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁶⁹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁷⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁷¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

43. Three women told the Committee that they had either experienced or seen hair-cutting as a punishment.

- One woman said that her “hair was never cut in Industrial School, but it was in [name of Magdalen Laundry]. ... ‘the black habits’ who were there for a long time, one of them did it”.⁷² [Note: ‘black habits’ refers to auxiliaries]
- One woman said “If you answered her back, your hair would be cut”.⁷³
- Another woman who was at the same Magdalen Laundry said that “they didn’t cut it first day, but yes for punishment”.⁷⁴

vi. Communication with the outside world - letters and visitors

44. The women who shared their experiences of the Magdalen Laundries with the Committee spoke of very similar experiences in relation to communication by letter with family or friends. They told the Committee that all letters which they sent or received were read by the Sisters.

- One woman said that in the Magdalen Laundry “Your letters were checked and letters in were definitely checked”.⁷⁵
- Another woman described the practice as follows: “They read them and they didn’t get out or in if they didn’t suit”.⁷⁶
- One woman said that in the Magdalen Laundry in which she was, “You could write once a month but the nun would read the letters”. She also

⁷² Woman represented by both Irish Women’s Survivors Network and Justice for Magdalenes

⁷³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁷⁴ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁷⁵ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁷⁶ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

said that “when you got letters they were open”. She also described the deep hurt caused when she wrote to her mother asking her to take her home and “she wrote back and said to them to keep me in 20 years”.⁷⁷

- A woman who lived at a different Magdalen Laundry said “I tried to write a letter saying I wasn’t getting school and the nun said ‘it can’t go’.”⁷⁸
- At another Magdalen Laundry, a woman told the Committee that “You were able to write letters but they were checked”.⁷⁹
- Another woman said that “They’d look at letter and tell me what to write”.⁸⁰
- Another said “my aunt started to write to me and my letters were opened”.⁸¹
- One woman said there were restrictions on who she could write to, that she was permitted to “only write to the last place I left”.⁸²

45. One woman said that letters were read aloud to her, that she was not permitted to read them herself:

- “Our letters were read. You’d never see it [the letter]”.⁸³

46. A number of women told the Committee that they had neither sent nor received letters as they did not have family or others to write to.

⁷⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁷⁸ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁷⁹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁸⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁸² Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

- A woman who was in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s said “I never had a letter because I had nobody to write to”⁸⁴
- Another woman simply said “I had no letters”.⁸⁵

47. Two women described giving letters to people other than the Sisters, for postage.

- “My sister worked in [place], she did try to see me and write but I never got letters. Sometimes I used write to a friend, and get the priest to post it for me”.⁸⁶
- The second woman who told us that she had given a letter to somebody else for postage had previously spent time in a Magdalen Laundry in the State, but it was at a Magdalen Laundry outside the State that the incident occurred. (“My friend [name] knew she was getting out for good the next day and she said write a letter for your mam and I’ll post it”).⁸⁷

48. The women who spoke to the Committee also shared their memories of the arrangements for visitors while they were in the Magdalen Laundries. The general pattern, as told to the Committee, seems to have been that visits were permitted, but that they were supervised.

- A woman who had been placed in a Magdalen Laundry by her father said “my father used to come to see me but the nun would be there all the time”.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁸⁸ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

- Another described how she had been placed in a Magdalen Laundry following severe abuse in the home. On being told she had a visitor, “I was sure it was [named Sister from industrial school], but she said it was my mother. I said ‘I have no mother’. She said ‘Yes and your auntie is there too’.” She said that her mother told her “all is forgiven, we can start afresh but I said ‘no thanks’.”⁸⁹
- Another woman who entered a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s said “My friend did come and see me but she laughed at me when she seen me” in her uniform.⁹⁰
- A woman at a different Magdalen Laundry said “One neighbour came to see me, they said don’t be mentioning that, say it’s domestic economy”.⁹¹
- Another woman said that she received visits from “the Legion of Mary, one Sunday in a month. You wouldn’t be deprived of a visitor”.⁹²

49. A small number of women said that family members were discouraged from visiting.

- One woman said that at the beginning of her time in a Magdalen Laundry, her “aunt came once or twice. I never saw anyone after that”.⁹³
- A different woman said she didn’t receive any visitors “I never saw my mam. My aunt said the nuns told her I was quite happy there”.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁹⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁹¹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁹² Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

⁹³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

⁹⁴ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

50. Some women also said they had no visitors as they had no family or friends:

- One woman said “I had no visitors, sure I didn’t have anyone”.⁹⁵

vii. Lack of information and a real fear of remaining there until death

51. Another very common grievance of the women who shared their stories with the Committee – particularly those who had previously been in Industrial or Reformatory Schools - was that there was a complete lack of information about why they were there and when they would get out. None of these women were aware of the period of supervision which followed discharge from industrial or reformatory school.

52. Due to this lack of information and the fact that they had been placed in an institution among many older women, a large number of the women spoke of a very real fear that they would remain in the Magdalen Laundry for the rest of their lives. Even if they left the Laundries after a very short time, some women told the Committee that they were never able to fully free themselves of this fear and uncertainty.

- A woman who was in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s (and who had previously been in an Industrial School) said that there was “never any communication to tell me the reason for anything. ... No one ever spoke why I was there. In our heads all we could think of is we are going to die here. That was an awful thing to carry”.⁹⁶
- A woman in a different Magdalen Laundry in the 1960s (who had also previously been in an industrial school) said “there was never a reason given for anything, we never thought we’d see the outside of the world

⁹⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

⁹⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

again. ... While you were in Ireland they knew exactly what you were doing. You had to leave Ireland to escape them".⁹⁷

- Another woman who had formerly attended an Industrial School said that what made her feel worst while in a Magdalen Laundry was "not knowing if you were ever going to get out of there ... I thought I was there forever".⁹⁸
- A woman who was in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s (placed there by a named person from her former Industrial School shortly after she had stayed out late one night while in employment) said "I don't know why that happened. I learned later only women with illegitimate babies went there. I was a young virgin, I don't know why I was put there".⁹⁹
- Another woman who was placed in a Magdalen Laundry as a young girl, after time in an Industrial School, said "I thought I'd be there for life and die in there. I was frightened".¹⁰⁰
- Another woman was released from an Industrial School to her family home. She said on leaving the Industrial School she had "no paperwork, no explanations, I had nothing". After reporting to the Industrial School that she was suffering physical and other abuse in the home, she was placed in a Magdalen Laundry. She said "the thing that gutted me mostly in the Laundry was knowing I probably would never get out of there. I went into myself a lot".¹⁰¹
- Another woman who entered a Magdalen Laundry as a young girl, following previous time in an Industrial School, said "I seen all these older people beside me, I used to cry myself to sleep".¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

⁹⁸ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

⁹⁹ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

¹⁰⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

¹⁰¹ Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

¹⁰² Woman represented by Irish Women's Survivors Network

- A different woman, who was placed in a Magdalen Laundry as a young girl shortly following her discharge from industrial school, said “It was devastating to hear that door locked and I was never ever to walk out. There was a big wall. I knew I was there for life. When that door was locked my life ended. I never moved on from there”.¹⁰³

53. A similar lack of information and awareness was also evident among young girls who were placed in Magdalen Laundries by their families.

- One woman who was placed in a Magdalen Laundry by a priest, at the request of her father, said “Father ... asked the priest to take me away. I went with him, I had no idea where i was going”.¹⁰⁴

viii. Recreation

54. The women who spoke to the Committee gave different accounts of recreation in the Magdalen Laundries.

- A woman described there being “a radio in the Laundry” in the 1950s, but that there was strict “silent at meals”.¹⁰⁵
- A woman who was in a different Magdalen Laundry in the 1950s said “we used to entertain people singing”.¹⁰⁶
- A woman who was in a Magdalen Laundry in the 1960s, said “There were outings in the summer, I remember going to Balbriggan”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹⁰⁴ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹⁰⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹⁰⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹⁰⁷ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

- Another woman said “they used to put on a bit of music and we were in operas”.¹⁰⁸
- Another woman who was in a different Magdalen Laundry in the 1960s said “They used to have cinefilms and if any kissing came on, the hand went over the film and we used to all boo. ... Two years before the end we got a TV. But Sunday evening halfway through the movie you’d hear ‘right now, bedtime’.”¹⁰⁹
- Another woman who was in a different Magdalen Laundry for a short time in the 1960s said “We seen one film one time”.¹¹⁰
- A different woman who was in that same Magdalen Laundry in the 1960s said “The recreation time you were making beads and Aran sweaters”.¹¹¹
- A different woman said that “there was a music room but they covered over the screen with a white cloth if there was kissing or anything in the film. And there was a lot of religious stuff”.¹¹²
- A different woman who spent time in two Magdalen Laundries spoke of her cell and said “I painted mine”. She said that a Sister asked where she had got the paint and that she answered “I knicked it. She laughed about that. And she let me pin up the Beatles on my wall”. She also said that “They took us to the seaside for a day”. She described one of the Laundries as having more freedom than the other – she said in that Laundry “you could go to bed or not. There was a radio in the laundry and I could listen to Radio Caroline and Luxembourg” in the evening.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

¹⁰⁹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹¹⁰ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹¹¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹¹² Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

¹¹³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

- Another woman said “we had plenty of different programmes, music, dancing, concerts and a number of other things”.¹¹⁴

ix. Manner of leaving

55. The manner in which these women came to leave the Magdalen Laundries was also a source of distress for a number of them. A number of women said that they were not informed of the day of their departure or their destination.

- One woman described her departure as follows:

“I remember it clearly. ... [named auxiliary] knew I was good at sewing and came and said ‘come and fix a zip’. She closed the door and said ‘come on, you’re going’. Leaving just like that, I had butterflies and bumblebees in my stomach. I made friends there, I was leaving my security, I was going out in the big world. I was given shitty clothes and shoes and a tiny brown suitcase and then taken to train by an auxiliary to [place]”.

A live-in job at a hospital had been arranged for her. She explained that from then on,

“I had to hide my past, I was so ashamed ... the lies I had to tell to cover up”.¹¹⁵

- Another woman said that similarly she was not aware of her imminent departure “I was working in the packing room and they took me out and said I was going home. They dressed me in a brown skirt and white top” and she then left.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Woman not represented by any group but having made direct contact with the Committee

¹¹⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹¹⁶ Woman introduced to the Committee by Justice for Magdalenes

56. A number of women told the Committee of being placed in live-in jobs (i.e. accommodation provided) upon departure from the Laundries, but that they had no say in selection of these jobs. Others said that they had, from time to time asked to be allowed to leave the Laundry, but were convinced to stay longer.

- A woman who had been placed in a Magdalen Laundry following her time in industrial school remained there until she was over 21, at which point she was sent to work in a hospital. “They had that hold on you”. She had once, at an earlier point, asked to leave the Laundry but the answer she received was “oh no, you can’t go out in the big bad world, you’re too thin and not able”.¹¹⁷
- A woman who had been in a Magdalen Laundry for a number of years described how she ultimately left. “I kept going to [named nun]. She would say ‘It’s a big bad world out there and I couldn’t. See I’m a quiet person. She was telling me you’re going to be a Child of Mary, I’d be going for my blue ribbon, this was going on for years. I had to sit on the stairs and go on hunger strike. It could go on for a week”.¹¹⁸
- A woman, who entered a Magdalen Laundry from Industrial School at the age of 13, left the Laundry at 16, when she was sent to a Domestic Economy School by the Religious Order.¹¹⁹
- One woman (who had in her earlier life been in an Industrial School) said she left the Magdalen Laundry when she was allowed to return to the live-in job she had held before her admission. This appears to have been arranged by the same ‘cruelty man’ (NSPCC Inspector) who had placed her in the Magdalen Laundry.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹¹⁸ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹¹⁹ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹²⁰ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

57. Some women told the Committee that they were reclaimed by members of their families following time in a Magdalen Laundry.

- A woman, who had been placed in a Magdalen Laundry by a priest at the request of her father, said “I could’ve got out after 3 months – my father came for me. But I was too ashamed to go home. I was put in there and it had a bad name and I’d have a bad name then too”. She remained in the Laundry for a number of years until she “made up my mind” that she would leave. “My aunt and father came for me and I went home then”.¹²¹
- One woman left a Magdalen Laundry when her brother came and “took me out”. That same woman recounted how, during her time in the Laundry, other girls and women “used to come and go. The nuns would send them to farms and people they knew to work. But sometimes they’d come back, God help them”.¹²²
- A woman who had been in a Magdalen Laundry for a number of years was temporarily helping at a hospital while living at the Laundry. She said that a nurse said to her “why don’t you try to get out of there” and that after that “I kept asking and asking”. She said that “in the end, [the priest who placed her there] gave them permission”.¹²³

58. Some women described running away from the Magdalen Laundry:

- A woman after a few months “ran out. I thumbed to get a lift”.¹²⁴
- Another woman said that she planned to run away. She said telling the Sisters “you are happy in and don’t mind staying and want to be an

¹²¹ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

¹²² Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹²³ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹²⁴ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network UK

auxiliary, you get trust by them”. She described running away in the laundry van “We would roll the trollies to the van at the back of laundry. I told the van man ‘I’m running away, I’m going to get in the van’. He said ‘oh no not another one’. He said ‘I don’t know you’re there’.”¹²⁵

59. A variety of other circumstances of departure were described to the Committee by some of the women. For example:

- A woman, who was in three Magdalen Laundries, said that in her second laundry she “screamed all night as a plan to get out”. She was transferred to another Laundry after that. “So I decided to scream all night there too. In the morning they opened the door and let me out. I had nowhere to go”.¹²⁶
- Another woman said she left the Magdalen Laundry for a hostel operated by the religious congregation which had operated the laundry.¹²⁷

B. Comments by the Religious Congregations in response

60. Representatives of all four Religious Congregations which operated the ten Magdalen Laundries within the scope of this Report also spoke to the Committee. In addition to sharing their records with the Committee, they sought to gather any memories they could from older members of their Communities and to reflect on them.

61. All four Congregations told the Committee that they deeply regret the fact that some women who were in their care carry painful memories.

62. They also made comments in relation to some of the specific issues raised above.

¹²⁵ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹²⁶ Woman represented by Irish Women’s Survivors Network

¹²⁷ Woman represented by Magdalene Survivors Together

63. In relation to the practice, in some Magdalen Laundries, of giving “House” or “Class” names to girls and women on entry in place of their given names, the Sisters explained that they did not intend to undermine the identity of the girls or women involved. They state that the practice was adopted from the very first days of the institutions in the 1800s, in order to preserve the anonymity and privacy of the girls and women who were admitted – in other words, that the intention of the practice was that every entrant would be protected from discussion of her past. They said that they regret the impact which this practice had on some women.

64. Regarding the daily routine at the Laundries as well as the nature of the working environment, one Congregation said:

“Sisters and women worked long and hard in a difficult environment of noise and steam. Over time as methods developed modern machinery was installed to ease the workload and men were employed to do the heavy work”.

65. Another Congregation, referring to the wash house, said:

“this was a hot, steamy environment ... The work was demanding and residents were separated from their previous lives and attachments”

while a third said

“At times the work undertaken was undoubtedly hard and no doubt the environment depended on and varied with the Sister in charge”.

66. All four Congregations said that the daily routine at the Magdalen Laundries operated by them was influenced by the pattern of religious life, including daily Mass and prayer. One Congregation said in relation to the Sisters “the lifestyle would have been predominately monastic prior to the second Vatican Council”.

67. Another Congregation noted as follows:

“Until the 1970s life in the refuge was influenced by the monastic routine. The residents normally began their day with Mass, followed by breakfast, then work. Dinner was served at 12.30pm and tea at 6.00pm. What was termed ‘recreation time’ followed the midday and evening meals. Periods of prayer were observed during the day. The following were the practices:

- The rosary was recited during the working day - called out by a resident or Sister to which all responded as they worked
- There was a pause for the Angelus at 12.00 and 6.00pm
- The Sacred Heart prayer was recited at 4.00pm.

Within these specific prayer times, silence was observed”.

68. Similar to that comment, the other three Congregations also said that the typical daily routine for women in the Magdalen Laundries began with Mass, followed by breakfast, before the commencement of the working day in the Laundry. For example:

“The residents normally began their day with mass at 7am followed by breakfast and then work. Working hours were from 9.00 a.m. until 12.00 p.m. and from 1.00 p.m. until 5.00 p.m. Dinner was served at 12.15 and the evening meal at 5.30pm. Morning and evening tea breaks were part of the daily routine. In the earlier years, the rosary was recited during the working day and periods of silence were observed. This practice seems to have ceased after Vatican II”.

Similarly:

“Both the Sisters and the women worked in the Laundry where the normal working week was Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in 1963. The laundry ceased for dinnertime (which was an hour long) and there was a half-day on Thursdays. No laundry work was carried out on Sundays or Holy Days or Bank Holidays. In 1958, the working week was Monday to Friday in wintertime, with a half-day on Saturday, not Thursday in summertime”.

69. Regarding freedom and lack of freedom in the Magdalen Laundries, two of the Congregations note that they were, until the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, enclosed Orders. This – as well as general security concerns – were stated by the Congregations to be the reason for certain practices. One Congregation said:

“Entrance gates to the grounds of the convent were locked at night. External doors to all buildings were also locked for security reasons. Dormitory doors were locked to prevent people moving about the buildings. Designated sisters held the keys and were on duty during the night to ensure safety, access to toilets and to prevent someone running away”.

70. Another Congregation stated:

“Residents were free to walk about in the grounds of both institutions. However, up to the 1960s the main entrance gates were locked during the times the women were out in the gardens. Anyone who called to the house was obliged to ring the outside bell for attention.

Over time, the policy was adopted of giving the residents freedom to move about as they wished. They began going out to shop, for walks, visiting family and friends, having weekends away and going on annual holidays”.

71. Another Congregation also indicated its awareness of how these practices would have been experienced by women living there, as well as noting a change in these practices in the 1960s.

“Refuges by their nature and proximity to enclosed convents had a need to give attention to security. We are aware that the intention of providing security to the residents could be experienced as a restriction on freedom.

In the 1960s, decisions were made to increase the personal freedom and responsibility of those in our Refuges and to encourage people,

where appropriate, to leave. Having said that, there is truth in the notion that the residents were not always encouraged or supported to leave the Refuge and indeed there was in an earlier time an active encouragement to remain. This was in part due to the fears of Sisters for the residents in view of the difficulties and hard realities they would have to contend with outside the Refuge”.

72. The Congregations also spoke to older members of their Communities to attempt to identify the practices which were adopted in relation to discipline in the Magdalen Laundries. As set out below, many of the descriptions they provide tally with those non-physical punishments detailed to the Committee by women who were admitted to the Magdalen Laundries.

73. One Congregation indicated as follows:

“Discipline was mainly exercised through persuasion and verbal correction. If a person was to be disciplined she could be reprimanded and have to make an apology. However, she could also find herself being deprived of a meal or being transferred to another refuge. Occasionally the call to prayer was used by some Sisters as a means of containing or defusing potentially difficult situations”.

74. Another Congregation said:

“Discipline was mainly exercised through persuasion, deprivation of pocket money / treats and verbal correction”.

75. Another, referred first to “persuasion and verbal correction”, and then noted as follows:

“Where such approaches failed there were other forms of discipline, such as having to stand or kneel for a period of time. Disciplinary actions would have varied from House to House. Ultimately if a person was perceived to be persistently difficult, they may have been transferred to another House within Good Shepherd or sent to another setting e.g. home or another religious run institution”.

76. All Congregations further acknowledge that these practices were of their time and regret the impact which they had on the women concerned. On this point, one Congregation said that:

“Whatever deprivations a person experienced prior to coming to a refuge, it needs to be acknowledged that these could have been compounded by the deprivations that existed as part of the nature of the refuge”.

And further acknowledged:

“There is the actual experience of the refuge itself, with little opportunity to discuss, discover or discern what had happened, or why, or what was now happening”.

77. In the words of one Sister, “There were a lot of things you would do differently if you had it again. But sure, we were institutionalised too”.

78. Overall and reflecting on the period of operation of the Laundries, the four Congregations which operated the Magdalen Laundries stated as follows:

“Through ongoing reflection we have become increasingly aware that whereas our intention was to provide refuge and a safe haven, the impact on some who have experienced our care has been something different. We are aware that for some, their experience of our care has been deeply wounding. We profoundly regret this”.

C. Recollections of General Medical Practitioners

79. The Committee also made contact with a number of medical doctors (General Practitioners) who had attended the girls and women who lived and worked in various Magdalen Laundries and invited them to contribute to the Committee’s work. In most cases, the doctors only had experience of the Magdalen Laundries in more recent decades, while in others, records were available which provided an insight into earlier times.

Galway

80. Dr Michael Coughlan was the general medical practitioner to the Galway Magdalen Laundry, first as a locum for three months in 1979 and then continuously from 1981 until its closure in 1984. He continued to attend the women who remained under the care of the Order until 1997.¹²⁸ He noted that it was his:

“privilege in providing a GP service [which] spanned a 16 year period, from 1981 to 1997. I cannot comment on conditions before those dates, only to say that I did not come across any complaints, symptoms or clinical signs which might alert one to maltreatment in the past”.

81. Dr Coughlan informed the Committee that he conducted a monthly clinic in the Magdalen Laundry. He said as follows:

“My first attendance as a GP at the Magdalen Residential Home was, I believe around 1979, when the regular GP, [named] (now deceased RIP), became ill and asked me to look after her patients over a period of about 3 months. My first impression was one of pleasant relief. I had expected to find a very unhappy, deprived group who would have significant medical and especially psychological complaints and special needs. I was, therefore, surprised to encounter a group of ladies who appeared to be quite happy and content with their current environment and who presented with the type of symptoms and problems that reflected those of the wider Practice population.

I was also pleasantly surprised to find that my visit to the Home consisted of a formal Clinic in a well-furnished Consulting Room and that I was assisted by a Nurse. All the Residents were allowed to “see the doctor” and the majority of them did. The Laundry was still in operation at that time but those who were working their shift were allowed time out to see me. My expected image of them all looking the same in drab uniform was quickly dissipated when I observed that each one presented dressed in colourful clothes and those who came

¹²⁸ Letter dated 22 September 2012 to the Inter Departmental Committee

directly from the Laundry were wearing a type of overlapping protective overall or apron, under which I could notice that they were wearing a variety of more personal choice of clothes. The most striking realisation, however, was that each lady presented as a unique individual, with a unique personality, well able to ask relevant questions and to express her opinion and, above all, ready and willing to gossip, to tease and be teased and to joke.

Although I seldom needed to visit a patient who was confined to bed, I was further pleasantly surprised to discover that each Resident had her own room, nicely furnished and I particularly remember the colourful bedclothes. I believe that they used to sleep in dormitories up to 1978, when a renovation programme commenced and they had their own rooms thereafter. I cannot recall whether I entered clinical notes in the regular patient files, during those 3 months or whether I made my own notes. In the 4 files which I found, my notes begin in 1981 in each case”.

82. Apart from these recollections of his initial impressions of the Magdalen Laundry, Dr Coughlan also informed the Committee of his ongoing engagement with the Laundry as follows:

“[Named Doctor] retired and I was invited to serve as GP to the Magdalen ladies around 1981. ...When I assumed this post I decided that, because of their unfortunate life histories these ladies deserved special attention and I dedicated my (free) time to them by holding a special two hour Clinic for them on a Saturday, once a month. This was much appreciated by both the ladies and the Mercy Sisters and was always treated as a bit of an occasion by all concerned.

On my way to the consulting room I had to pass through a dining room where I was welcomed by the ladies, seated around tables in groups of four, happily chatting as they finished breakfast. I was also greeted by [name] a local lady who was employed as Cook and she appeared to

have a unique relationship with the ladies. After I sat down at my desk [name] a jovial Resident would proudly arrive with a linen-covered tray laden with tea and buns. I was always accompanied by a qualified Nurse, or if she could not attend, by one of the Nuns who assisted me in her absence”.

83. Regarding the general pattern of consultations and medical complaints, Dr Coughlan said as follows:

“On almost every occasion all the Residents came to see me and I believed that in the case of many of them the reason for coming was more social than medical. They used to share their recent news with me, such as somebody’s birthday, an entertainment event that they had attended either in-house or out-town, a trip to Knock and even to Lourdes or to draw to my attention that they had been to the hairdresser: “Do you like my hair Doctor?”. Almost all of them were curious about my own life and would want to know about my family, on an ongoing basis.

Assisted by the Nurse I was in the habit of listening to and to performing a physical examination on each Resident and attention was regularly paid to Blood Pressure and urine testing, along with blood tests, such as Cholesterol estimation, from time to time.

Whenever I sensed that one of the ladies had something personal or sensitive to discuss, I always asked the Nurse or Nun to leave and afforded them the opportunity to elaborate in confidence. Interestingly, I cannot recall any occasion that the patient complained in any manner about her treatment by the Nuns in the Home, neither recently nor in the distant past, but I do recall them discussing problems such as incontinence, prolapse and other sensitive issues. Significantly, I do remember that on several occasions during such more intimate consultations I would be told, in a whispered, but happy voice, bits of news such as “I had a visitor during the week. It was my son and it

went very well. He will be back again next month". I remember feeling pleased that such reunions were happening, whether the identity of the visitor was officially known or not".

He also made more general remarks of his experience of the institution:

"The Laundry did not close until 1984 and, as mentioned earlier, all the Residents attended in their clothes of choice, which were varied and colourful. Those who came directly from the work place wore their own clothes, but also wore a protective bright apron which often had a floral pattern. There was no uniform as such. They were always clean and tidy and I particularly remember that they all had regular hair do's.

I cannot comment on conditions within the laundry itself as I never had occasion to go there. However, I can vouch that, the home environment was, surprisingly good. There was adequate heating and nice furnishings. There was a spacious recreation hall which had a radio and television. I think it was around 1985 that I attended the official opening of a new purpose-built wing for the Residents which was fitted with modern equipment and furnishings had hotel-style rooms for the residents and a spacious and pleasant sitting room.

I could see for myself that they had a very good and varied diet and were very well nourished. On occasions, especially when my Clinic ran late, [name] was serving lunch and I was always pleased when she invited me to sit down with the Residents and have some. It always tasted delicious".

84. Dr Coughlan also made the following comment regarding any possible evidence of physical abuse in the past:

"With respect to the question of any evidence of past injuries, broken bones or any other suggestions of physical or psychological abuse in the past, I cannot remember coming across any patient that presented with symptoms or signs that would or should have alerted me to such

maltreatment, apart from one case when a resident got scalded with hot water, which I believed to be an accidental injury”.

85. He made the following comment regarding certification of death:

“Regarding the issue of Death Certification, I recall that there was some weakness in the system. This did not appear to be due to any deliberate decision to not seek certification, but rather to an apparent ignorance or lack of awareness on behalf of the person in charge of their responsibility in this regard. It has always been my understanding that the Law of the Land requires the Next of Kin, or the Householder, or the Custodian or Guardian of the deceased to register a death and that the GP has no direct responsibility. Yet, as has often happened when dealing with the wider Practice population, I have often had to remind people to do so”.

86. He summarised his experience as follows:

“Overall, my experience with the Magdalen was a happy and gratifying one. The Residents were a delightful and happy group of ladies, each with their own unique personality and they appeared to me to have a good and friendly relationship with the Mercy Sisters. Equally, my impression was that the Sisters were very caring towards the Residents and I never found any evidence to the contrary”.

Sean McDermott Street

87. Dr John Ryan was the general medical practitioner to the Magdalen Laundry at Sean McDermott Street in Dublin from 1980 until closure. He also contributed to the Committee’s work.¹²⁹ Prior to doing so, he reviewed some contemporaneous patient’s records and materials going back to 1963.

88. Regarding injuries and the possibility of illtreatment, he said as follows:

¹²⁹ Letter dated 2 November 2011 to the Inter-Departmental Committee

“there were a number of incidents of fractures but they were all from falls and usually out in the city, but none were suspicious in any way and I did not come across any evidence of unexplained bruising or scalding etc. ... There was nothing stated by any of the residents ... in relation to any possible ill treatment in the convent”.

Donnybrook

89. Dr Donal Kelly was the general medical practitioner to the Magdalen Laundry at Donnybrook in Dublin from 1968 onwards and, before contributing to the Committee’s work, reviewed some contemporaneous patients records.¹³⁰

90. He said that he “visited on a weekly basis to assess the sick, the old and the infirm. I would also be called for any medical emergencies that might arise”. In pertinent part, his letter indicated as follows:

“Many of these ladies were forgotten by their own or orphaned. They were poorly educated and some were mentally retarded. If the Sisters of Charity had not provided them with a home I don’t know who would have cared for them.

Never did I witness any evidence of physical or mental abuse. My surgery could also be visited by the ladies if they were fit enough to travel there. They were well fed and dressed in ordinary clothes provided often by [name of Sister]. A small stipend was given to them for cigarettes, chocolate and the cinema”.

Sunday’s Well, Cork

91. Dr Harry Comber was the general medical practitioner from 1986 to 1992 to the women who remained at the premises of the Magdalen Laundry at Sunday’s Well, Cork after closure of the Laundry in 1977.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Letter dated 16 June 2012 to the Inter-Departmental Committee

¹³¹ Letter dated 16 June 2012 to the Inter-Departmental Committee

92. He noted as follows, in pertinent part:

“I held a surgery fortnightly at the convent / residence from 1986 to 1992 (there was no laundry in operation during my time there) alternatively for the residents and the Sisters. Many of the residents attended me at these monthly surgeries for routine checkups of blood pressure and other chronic conditions, although they were mostly in good health. The women could also attend me at my surgery and most did so from time to time if acutely ill or if they didn’t wish to wait for my next visit.

The Sister who acted as nurse was sometimes present during consultations at the convent and supplied useful information, but she would leave if requested.

I think her presence was a little inhibitory, but I always had the opportunity to discuss matters with the women in private if they wished. She rarely accompanied them to my outside surgery unless she had some concerns which she needed to share with me.

The women were in good general health. They tended to be overweight and sedentary and many took little or no exercise. I have no specific information on their diet, but my impression was that it was a traditional Irish diet, with a lot of carbohydrate”.

93. He made the following comments on the general types of presenting complaints and the question of any possible physical abuse:

“Their presenting complaints were those I would expect from women their age; most were in their 60s or older. There were more osteoarthritis than usual, partly due to overweight, but a number blamed repetitive work on treadle sewing machines for knee and ankle problems. I could not quantify this; it is just an impression, but it seemed plausible at the time.

There was no evidence of any traumatic injuries inflicted during my time, nor did anyone ever show me evidence of any previous injury.

However the overall atmosphere in the 1980s and 1990s was very benign and it didn't occur to me that this was a possibility during that period I never actively searched for or enquired after this. However two women complained to me of previous ill treatment. I cannot now recollect when this alleged illtreatment took place, but it had been a long time, probably in the 1940s or 1950s. They told me that one particular sister ... had frequently beaten them, sometimes with a heavy crucifix which she wore on her belt. They also told of being locked in solitary confinement in a padded room, of having letters to and from their families withheld and of wearing only a cape over their underclothes ("in case they would run away") when they left the grounds. I found these accounts quite convincing. ... They asked me not to take any action on the basis of these complaints. No other women ever complained to me of mistreatment and by the 1980s this illtreatment seemed to have ceased a long time in the past".

94. He summarised his experience as follows:

"The women seemed reasonably happy, although some regretted the loss of opportunity to have a life, families and children of their own. They were treated well, although patronisingly, by the sisters. They were expected to be rather passive within the community. They had the usual opportunities for recreation – reading, walking, TV. They were to a large extent institutionalised and rarely seemed to go out except for walks in the locality. ... I would be surprised if there was, in the time I was there, any mistreatment of them, either verbal or physical".

Waterford

95. Dr Malachy Coleman was the general medical practitioner to the Magdalen Laundry at Waterford from 1984 and, after closure of the Laundry, for the

women who remained in sheltered accommodation until approximately 2000. Prior to providing an input to the Committee's work, he reviewed some contemporaneous patients records.¹³²

96. Dr Coleman, after joining the Keogh Practice, replaced a colleague who had for an earlier period been designated as the Doctor for the Sisters and women living at the Good Shepherd convent. He confirmed that clinics were held at the convent:

“I was instructed to attend the convent for a two hour session on Friday evenings and did so for up to ten years until the old convent closed and the ladies transferred into purpose built accommodation at another site. I did attend the newly built convent for a further few years but gradually the ladies began to make appointments and attend other doctors at our surgery... We discontinued the weekly clinics in the convent”.

97. Regarding the structure of the clinic and consultations, Dr Coleman noted as follows:

“A specific nun was usually designated to take care of the ladies and she would usually outline any specific complaints the ladies had and she usually would remain throughout the consultation. Occasionally one or two of the ladies would request to be seen on their own. Examinations in the convent were quite limited and involved blood pressure checks, lung examination, general abdominal and ear, nose and throat examinations. Any intimate examinations were referred to the surgery to be carried out by our lady doctors.

When the ladies moved in to the family unit houses they began to attend the surgery in the company of their carer. ... The environment allowed free communication between the ladies and me and I would

¹³² Letter dated 6 July 2012 to the Inter-Departmental Committee

feel that, despite the presence of a chaperone, I never felt that the ladies were inhibited from talking to me on any subject”.

98. He also made some comments on the general nature of presenting medical complaints of the women and on their living environment:

“I always felt that the ladies were well fed and well cared for. Their complaints were routine and normal consistent with those presenting in general practice. I saw no evidence of any traumatic injuries either historically, prior to my taking up the post, or for the time I cared for the ladies.

In spite of the fact that the original convent was an old building it always seemed quite warm and water was always available for hand washing. The ladies wore ordinary clothing throughout my time. The ladies were always well kept in their general appearance.

I know they did go on holidays every year and were brought on trips by the local Lions Club”.

99. In conclusion he made the following general remarks:

“My overall impression of the Good Shepherd Convent in the main, was of an institute run by caring nuns which contained a number of ladies who were unlikely to be able to care for themselves. It would be fair to comment that they were quite institutionalised and so it would be difficult to judge their capacity to care for themselves at the time I took over their care. While the ladies were very deferential to the nuns I did not at any stage get an impression of coercion or fear in the relationship between the ladies and the nuns. If anything I think the nuns did too much for the ladies and so decreased their capacity to care for themselves”.

D. Mr John Kennedy (Limerick)

100. Mr John Kennedy was, as set out elsewhere in this Report, employed as manager of the laundry operated by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Limerick from 1976 to 1982, at which point he purchased the laundry as a going concern.

101. Mr Kennedy provided a statement to the Committee setting out his recollections of the laundry both from during his time as manager of the laundry, and also from earlier years, when he visited the Laundry. In that regard, he noted that he had:

“been visiting the convent in Limerick since I was a baby in a Moses basket and as I grew up I got to know some of the Residents from tours of the Laundry with my aunt [named]”.¹³³

Throughout his statement, he terms the women who lived and worked in the Laundry as Residents, “as the term Magdalene is derogatory and offensive to them”.

102. Mr Kennedy’s comments may be summarised to the effect that significant changes occurred in the Laundry from the 1960s, or more particularly in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. His comments can be divided into the period before and after this.

103. He provided a brief summary of the general conditions which he had either witnessed as a child or heard about from older women living in the Laundry upon his employment:

“I never saw or was told of any instance of corporal punishment. However, verbal reprimanding was often used to discipline the Residents, sometimes for very petty infringements of the rules. More alleged serious offences could involve the person apologizing on their

¹³³ Statement of John Kennedy to the Inter Departmental Committee dated 8 October 2012

knees in front of the entire Class in the refectory. I have heard of so called “difficult” Residents being transferred to the laundries in Cork, Waterford and New Ross”.¹³⁴

104. He further stated that he had been told by some older women of restrictions on communication during this earlier period:

“All their outgoing and incoming mail was censored and no negative comments about the establishment were allowed. They had no access to newspapers or magazines or radio and they weren’t even allowed to vote. Their first outing outside the walls was in the 50’s when they were taken on a bus trip to Glin and back”.

105. Regarding living arrangements in this early period, he was told that:

“They had no privacy as they slept in a large open plan dormitory and had a communal washing area which had to be accessed every morning by crossing an open yard. Daily, they had to endure long periods of silence and had to pray in the morning at Mass, at their work and in the evening”.¹³⁵

106. Mr Kennedy then indicated what he was told of changes in practices in the Magdalen Laundry after the Second Vatican Council:

“In this new era the ‘*compus mentus*’ Residents could freely leave St. Mary’s permanently without somebody having to “claim” them. They were freely able to talk to Nuns and many became good friends with some of them. After leaving, if they ever wanted to come back as Residents they were welcome, and some did after some years like [3 named residents]. The intellectually challenged had the same freedoms but had to have a ‘minder’.

¹³⁴ Id

¹³⁵ Id

Also at this time (1960s) a big building project which benefited the Residents was undertaken voluntarily by the Nuns with no help from the Government. Architects drew up plans to completely refurbish and modernize St. Mary's accommodation building, their kitchen and refectory and recreation areas. Laundry consultants advised the architects on redesigning the laundry, improving lighting, ventilation and replacing circa two thirds of the laundry washing capacity with new state of the art fully automatic washer-extractors, a new automatic steam boiler and so on. The list is too long to document in full. The end result was stunning and was a huge improvement in the living and working conditions of the Residents".¹³⁶

107. He makes a number of comments from his direct experience as manager of the laundry from 1976 to 1982. He indicates there were 93 women living and working there upon taking up his post.

"I always found them to be kind, decent, gentle and pious ladies. They were also very hardworking and dedicated to their daily duties. ... By 1976 when I started, most of them ranged in ages from over 40 to circa mid 80's. The absence of young Residents was a clear reflection of the changes in society. I should point out that the elderly ladies were not expected to work in the Laundry, but some of them ambled in every day to see what was going on. They used to sit on a long bench behind the big table in the "Crescent room" watching everything and folding the odd amice or purificator.

The laundry that I came into in 1976 bore no resemblance in atmosphere or appearance to that of the pre 60's. ... Walking into the laundry with its expensive non slip vinyl floor covering, standards of cleanliness like those found in a hospital and all the other changes, made it for me, a state of the art industrial place of work. The maintenance problems with the plant were easily solved over time by

¹³⁶ Id

hiring a full time fitter/ electrician – something the Nuns never did, which was false economy.

I can remember many occasions during my time as manager when [named woman's] sister and her family visited her; they walked in off the street to the Packing room where she worked and casually chatted to her before she took them for a cup of tea. There were transistor radios blaring out pop music all over the place. [Named woman] RIP used to give my small children rides around the laundry in a trolley, which they still fondly remember".¹³⁷

E. Patricia Burke Brogan (Galway)

108. Patricia Burke Brogan was a novice in the Sisters of Mercy and spent a week in the Magdalen Laundry in Galway in the late 1950s. She later wrote two plays, *Eclipsed* (1992) and *Stained Glass at Samhain* (2002), both of which are set in a Magdalen Laundry. She also wrote a poem on the subject entitled "Make Visible the Tree".

109. A statement by Ms Brogan was submitted to the Committee by the advocacy group Justice for Magdalenes. The Chair also met with Ms Brogan to discuss directly her recollections of the Magdalen Laundry in Galway and subsequently agreed the following summary of her position with her.

110. Ms Brogan first said that her writings were fictionalised accounts and were not to be considered a narrative of what she had witnessed in the course of her week in the Magdalen Laundry.

111. She said, however, that she was very disillusioned by her time in the Laundry and that the emotion and passion she felt on the subject are demonstrated in her plays.

¹³⁷ Id

112. She confirmed that both the external and internal doors of the Laundry were locked. She said that this deprivation of the freedom of the women who lived there was the principal issue which she recalled and found most difficult to accept. She also said that the women were not paid for their work.
113. She said that she did not witness any physical ill-treatment or punishment of the women in the Magdalen Laundry by the Sisters working there or by auxiliaries.
114. She did however witness cutting remarks or psychological abuse – she recalled, for instance, that when an elderly woman tripped in the Laundry, a Sister said “that’s not the first time you’ve fallen”.
115. Regarding the broader context, she described the Magdalen Laundries as an “underworld”. She said that “the women were dumped in the laundries by their families, their lovers and by the State”. She spoke of women with low IQ or who were otherwise not “marriageable were also dumped in the laundries” and “despised and rejected”.

F. Retired Probation Officers

116. Two retired Probation Officers, both of whom took up their duties in 1966, also provided input to the Committee’s work. They confirmed that in the course of their work, they would meet regularly with girls and women who were on probation in the Magdalen Laundries. The information they provided to the Committee on this issue is included in Chapter 9. However they also made some broader comments regarding the conditions they observed in the Magdalen Laundries during their visits.
117. In general and regarding conditions in the laundries, the retired Probation Officers said that in their time visiting the Magdalen Laundries they saw no instances of girls having their heads shaved. Nor was there any complaint about that or any other ill-treatment in their regular (unsupervised) meetings in the Laundries with the girls and women who were there on probation.

118. These retired Probation Officers both recalled seeing other women in the Magdalen Laundries “in passing” while visiting girls and women on probation. They said their impression was that many of these other women were older, “simple”, “unemployable” or “past anything”. One of the Probation Officers said that they often looked “infirm before their time”.

119. Although they said that “life in general could be difficult then”, they felt that overall the conditions “were reasonable for the time”. “There would be the occasional concert or garden party, but it would be fair to say the atmosphere in general was institutional.”

120. Both recalled other people visiting the Magdalen Laundries, including “teachers going in to the girls and women in the laundries, as the nuns had set up other activities and classes such as literacy and typing”, as well as doctors. One of the retired Probation Officers recalled an instance in which she had contacted a doctor in St Brendan’s Psychiatric Hospital to ask his advice on the case of woman in Sean MacDermott Street, and that the doctor “attended to her within the hour” at the Magdalen Laundry.

G. Chaplain at Sean McDermott Street

121. A priest who served as Chaplain at Sean McDermott Street for a 9 year period from the early 1960s until the early 1970s also provided input to the Committee. He made a detailed statement, including comment on the changes brought about in the operation of the institution during the 1960s. On his first arrival, he said

“the residents would have been dressed in dark bottle green and some of them would be in black ... Now I would say that there was a very large number of them in an open dormitory. ... It was awful. ... And I sat down with the Sisters and said you know, we’re going to have to work on things”.

His recollection of some of the older women was that:

“quite a number of them would be special needs. They would be mildly mentally handicapped, or a physical handicap or both. Literacy would be very low”.

122. He then described some of the improvements brought about over the next years.

“We set up what is called the Celtic Industry. And the Celtic Industry was the bawneen cloth, a white Donegal cloth which was big and in fashion then. And we got designs from the museum and we made cushion covers and backs for this and that and we knitted Aran sweaters. You see the Sisters were semi-enclosed, so I went up to Arnotts and they supported me like most supported me like nobody’s business, they were great. Arnotts and Brown Thomas, they were the two main outlets and they bought the stuff from me. So all the girls who were making stuff formed a co-operative, my God a lot of them didn’t understand. ... So as time went on, out of the money they all got, they all bought their clothes. So nobody was in bottle green or black dresses, they were all able to dress themselves. Then we tackled the dormitories and we built cubicles for every single girl with her own wardrobe, so life was transformed”.

123. He also described alterations to the lifestyle and the possibility of outings for the women. For example he recounted going to the cinema with a group of the women:

“So I went down to 30 of them and I said ‘I’ll take you to the pictures provided you don’t let me down. That we’ll go, enjoy the picture and com(e) back’. I said ‘it’s on your honour’. And the Sisters agreed on my honour! God if it happened today! I walked up Sean McDermot Street, collar and coat the works. At that time ... with 30 women! ... So we went down we looked in Clery’s window and a few others and it was great and we went home and it was a great success so that kind of thing went on a little bit”.

He also referred to a holiday house in Rush and a school in Greystones, which they hired for a holiday in summer, as well as visits to Lourdes.

124. He added, however, that “There was no violence that I ever came across”. His only additional comment in that regard was that “You might have a girl pull the hair off another girl”. As an example, he recounted small disputes between the women living there such as:

“Confessions were on Saturday and I’d be in, sure the next thing is she’d be in and it was no more confession than the man on the moon but they’d say: ‘Do you know Mary so and so whose come in yesterday? And I’d say ‘yeah’, ‘well she’s a black bra and I want it for the weekend. I’m going out and she won’t be going out, would you get it for me?’ Now I wouldn’t of course, but you’d have to listen to that sort of thing but that was the simple human life that was going on and you help them along like you help your own children”.

125. Regarding outside work, the priest said that a number of hostels provided cleaning jobs for women living at Sean McDermott Street who wished to take up such opportunities:

“It would be cleaning rooms and sweeping, that sort of thing, so quite a lot of them had a Saturday, Sunday job. And they got money for that and that money was theirs. And again they bought clothes and things that they wanted. But more importantly, they were getting out and were coming back. They were now beginning to live a near normal life if you know what I mean”.¹³⁸

126. He also recalled entertainment in the institution itself. He said:

“We used to have concerts on Sunday nights. I think the Guards were great. You had a few comedians and things like that. ... Some of the Guards came in not because they were Guards but because they were

¹³⁸ Id at 70

in an entertainment club or something like that. They'd come in as members of that. ... So I'm only telling you that to show that there is a humane side to the whole story. And I am sure that there are sad, sad cases and terrible cases. The fact that they were put in was a tragedy".

[This comment likely refers to the Dublin Lions Club, on which see below]

H. Summary of position by Sally Mulready and Phyllis Morgan

127. Thirty-one women who, in their earlier lives, were admitted to and worked in a Magdalen Laundry are represented by the Irish Women's Survivor's Network, chaired by Sally Mulready with Phyllis Morgan serving as vice-Chair.

128. On the strength of their long and close engagement with the women, Ms Mulready and Ms Morgan provided the Committee with a letter summarising the main issues of concern to these women. Prior to sending the letter to the Committee, Ms Mulready and Ms Morgan also verified with the women that it accurately captured their experiences.

129. This contribution was additional and not alternative to direct contact by the Committee with these women who had lived and worked in the Magdalen Laundries. Some key elements of that submission are summarised here.

130. The overall effect on these women, most of whom had also been in Industrial or Reformatory School, of time spent in a Magdalen Laundry was summarised as follows:

"The psychological and physical impact of their experience has been devastating and has stayed with them throughout their adult lives. Their suffering was greater still because they did not know why they were there, or who was responsible for placing them in these laundries. They had no idea when they would be released.

Transportation of 14-16 year old girls from Industrial Schools to the laundries was a common occurrence. It was carried out very like the system of transferring prisoners from one prison to another, with no

consent sought or given by the young women themselves and little to no explanation of where they were going or why this was happening. Many women tell us how heartbroken they were to know they were never returning to their friends and to the place, the only place, which they knew of as home. The callous way in which this was done is often highlighted as a major reason for the heartache it caused. You were given no warning and no chance to say goodbye to friends”.

131. The summary also addresses the women’s recollections of working conditions in the Laundries:

“The floors of the laundry were constantly floating with water – often soapy dirty water streaming out. There was constant inhaling of steam from the large colander (large ironing board). Young women stood either side of the colander for up to two or three hours in the morning and again in the afternoon. Large buckets of boiling water were scattered around the floor used for starching and steaming. The light was poor and their only view from the windows was more iron bars. There was often a foul smell in the air from the extensive, industrial laundry of soiled sheets from hospitals, hotels, convents, farms and more”.

132. The summary provided by Ms Mulready and Ms Morgan also addresses the information given to them in relation to the effect on the women of uncertainty about their position.

“The women have told us of the mental turmoil and agony at being unable to find out why they were placed in the laundries, who put them there and when they would be released. Many women asked constantly when they might be released and rarely got a straight answer. They were often told “when you are ready” or they would be told “there is nobody out there wants you” or “you will soon find out”.

Women were given so little information about their detention that they frequently believed that no-one on the outside world knew about them,

no one would come for them and that they would die in the Laundries. One woman recently told us that “I knew nobody on the outside and so I wrote to nobody. I was not aware if anyone knew I was there”.

Women speak of severe distress and anxiety and how they cried often at night in the darkness of their dormitories. Crying themselves to sleep in utter despair about their future lives was common”.

133. The letter also addresses the issue of punishments in the Magdalen Laundries.

“The punishments for trying to escape included being separated from other women, left in isolation (a separate room) for two or three days after the attempted escape and fed their meals in isolation. They were escorted to and from the toilet and then back to isolation. One woman has told us that she was isolated from everyone else for three days and never again saw the girl who she tried to escape with”.

134. The issue of physical punishment or abuse is also addressed in the letter:

“We have asked many times by those looking into this terrible part of Irish history, both privately to the women and in group meetings, about the role nuns played in any kind of physical punishment in the Laundries. Bearing in mind that we are talking here only about the experiences of women *in the Laundries*, (as opposed to in other parts of religious institutional care), it is our understanding that the severe physical brutality, including beatings and sexual assault which was common place in other institutions, did not take place in the Magdalen Laundries. We have in fact never been told of sexual assault or brutal physical assault, including beatings with canes or belts, being perpetrated by nuns in the Laundries.

Two women describe seeing nuns wearing belts perhaps for intimidation purposes, but no-one has told us they were used on them. Women have often described getting a ‘thump in the back’ or their hair

pulled in retaliation for answering back or complaining but physical violence from the nuns does not seem to have gone beyond this in most cases.

As both authors of this submission spent our childhoods and young adulthood in institutions, we are both fully aware from personal experience and observations that violence of all kinds was common place in children's institutions. However, we do not believe such violence took place in the Laundries".

135. The summary suggests that instead of physical punishment, the Laundries were places of hard labour and "psychological cruelty and isolation". Ms Mulready and Ms Morgan come to the view that "this was a different, not a lesser, form of assault".

136. The letter also made a number of comments regarding the Laundries as they impacted on the women *as women*.

"Many women have spoken of 'new arrivals' being brought to the auxiliaries upon their arrival in order to have their hair cut (to defeminise them), to have their clothing taken from them and their new Laundry clothes given to them to wear (always unflattering clothes.)"

137. Following these and other comments, the letter summarising the experiences and concerns of the 31 women they represent says:

"We hope that time is not wasted calling for more statutory enquiries or demanding yet more investigations and more bureaucratic statutory processes. In their advanced years the women have repeatedly told us they have no wish for conflict or confrontation. Nor do they want to enter into lengthy litigation or another redress process, which would cause more distress and anxiety".

I. Dublin Lions Club

138. A member of the Dublin Lions Club also made a submission to the Committee. He indicated that, in the early 1960s, the Dublin Lions Club began to take part in entertainment sessions for the women at Sean McDermott Street. These continued until closure of the Laundry. He said:

“We brought a professional keyboard player and usually 7 -10 of our members. We danced with them or got them to sing or recite, we told them funny stories and brought minerals and biscuits for the interval. They were always very happy and contented. We stayed from 7.30 to about 9 / 9.15p.m.

In those early days we met about 100 who attended each session that sadly because of deaths reduced to about 25. We were always well received by staff and residents particularly showed their excitement. We never got any complaint. The residents were well cared for and well dressed.

About 20 years ago we got the bright idea of including 4 of them for a holiday for 1 week with 900 other old folks. It was a disaster, they could not cope outside and missed the care and routine of the Institution. We brought them back after 1 or 2 days”.

J. Materials considered

Document entitled “Magdalen Home Rules and Horarium”

139. A document entitled “Magdalen Home Rules and Horarium” and relating to the Magdalen Laundry operated in Galway by the Sisters of Mercy was identified in a non-State archive.¹³⁹ The record, of which there was no institutional memory in the Sisters of Mercy, presents as a general guide to the “object of the Institute” and its daily routine.

¹³⁹ Ref B/2249

140. No date is marked on the document, but the Committee made efforts to estimate the time-period in which it might have been created. Members of the Sisters of Mercy who worked in the Magdalen Laundry were consulted and none – the earliest of whom had been in the Magdalen Laundry in 1948 and others who were there from the 1950s onwards - had been aware of any rule book or heard mention of it. Further, although a Sister who was in the Magdalen Laundry in 1948 remembered some older women being referred to as “consecrated”, Sisters who worked in the Laundry from the 1950s onwards were not aware of any such practice of women becoming consecrates occurring in Galway. The section of the document referring to burials refers to the use of two cemeteries – one on the site and one a public cemetery. The public cemetery referred to is the “New Cemetery”. The first burial of a woman from the Magdalen Laundry at that public cemetery was in 1924. The last burial in the cemetery on the site was in 1955.

141. Accordingly it appears that the document may date to the period between first use of the “New Cemetery” in 1924 and the late 1940s (when institutional memory for the Magdalen Laundry commences) or at a minimum prior to 1955 (when the last burial took place in the cemetery on site).

142. The document refers to women as “penitents” and indicates they are, on admission, “strictly forbidden to mention anything concerning their past life or associates”.¹⁴⁰ It further indicates that the women were:

“to have no communication whatever with their friends and acquaintances, but parents may see them occasionally, and for a short time, in presence of one of the Sisters”.¹⁴¹

143. It refers to their assigned duties “which usually consist of laundry work”.¹⁴² A daily routine including daily Mass and frequent prayer is given. The indicated times for “laundry and duties” are from 8.30am to 12 o’clock, from 12.50pm to

¹⁴⁰ Id at 1

¹⁴¹ Id at 7

¹⁴² Id at 1

3.15pm and from 3.30pm until 7pm. The period for “recreation” was from the end of supper at 7.30pm until 9pm.¹⁴³

144. General rules including a prohibition on “conversing with the workmen” and avoidance of “particular friendships with each other” are included.¹⁴⁴ The issue of punishments is also addressed. Four types of punishment are mentioned, as follows:

- “cutting of hair”;
- “Being deprived of sugar in tea” and “number of meals being lessened”;
- “being deprived of general recreation”;
- where “the fault be a grievous one against Superiors of Sisters, the Penitent must apologise in the Chapel after Mass in the presence of all”; or
- where the “culprit be a Child of Mary she is deprived of her ribbon”.¹⁴⁵

145. The possibility of women becoming consecrates and, in doing so, to decide to remain in the Magdalen Laundry for life, is referred to.

“when penitents have spent a number of years in the Home and are most exemplary with regard to their work, conduct and the observance of the Rules of the Institute, they may, if they so desire, consecrate their lives to God in the Magdalen Home.”¹⁴⁶

After becoming a consecrate, such a woman would receive a “name in penance” by which they would be known. Consecrates were buried in the cemetery on the grounds, while others were buried in an identified public cemetery.

146. Departure from the Magdalen Laundry of women who did not choose to become consecrates is also referred to and confirmed. It says there was

¹⁴³ Id at 19

¹⁴⁴ Id at 16

¹⁴⁵ Id at 18

¹⁴⁶ Id at 11

“no special length of time for Penitents to be kept in the Home. If a girl remains for three years and if, during that time, she leads a good, regular life ... she may return to the world at the end of that period.”¹⁴⁷

147. The suggestion is, however, that such a woman would need somewhere to go to: “It is to be understood that she returns to her parents or relations, otherwise she is detained in the Home”.¹⁴⁸ The record continues to state that:

“Many Penitents have actually returned to the world and have not relapsed into their former way of living. In fact they have become good wives and mothers. On leaving they are given a suitable outfit and sufficient money to pay their expenses to their destination. These girls continue to correspond with the Sisters”.¹⁴⁹

Ryan Report

148. The Report of the Commission to enquire into Child Abuse (CICA, commonly referred to as “the Ryan Report”) is sometimes cited in relation to the conditions in the Magdalen Laundries.

149. Volume III Chapter 18 of that Report concerns “Residential laundries, hostels, Novitiates, short-term residential services for children and adolescents, and other residential settings”. The source on which this Chapter was based was the hearings of the Confidential Committee.

150. This Chapter of the Ryan Report relates to a considerably broader range of institutions than Magdalen Laundries. It includes the testimony of both men and women who spent time in a range of institutions such as novitiates, training centres, short-term residential homes for children, and so on. Even

¹⁴⁷ Id at 14-15

¹⁴⁸ Id

¹⁴⁹ Id

the category “residential laundries” is broader than the category of Magdalen Laundries, with which this Report is concerned.

151. The Committee had hoped that the Secretariat of CICA would be in a position to clarify for it which, if any, of the paragraphs contained in Volume III Chapter 18 of its Report related to any of the 10 Magdalen Laundries within the scope of this Committee’s work, and which paragraphs of the Chapter relate instead to other institutions such as other institutional laundries, novitiates or hostels. No personal information of any kind was sought. Rather, as Volume III Chapter 18 concerns a wide range of categories of institutions, the Committee would have found it useful to have an indication of which of these paragraphs (if any) referred to Magdalen Laundries.

152. The CICA Secretariat was, however, unable to provide this clarification. It indicated that it was prohibited from disclosing any information provided to the Confidential Committee due to section 27 of the Commission to enquire into Child Abuse Act 2000, which provides in pertinent part as follows:

“(1) Subject to the provisions of this section but notwithstanding any provision of, or of an instrument made under, a statute or any rule of law, a person (including the Confidential Committee) shall not disclose information provided to the Confidential Committee and obtained by the person in the course of the performance of the functions of the person under this Act.

...

(6) A person who contravenes subsection (1) shall be guilty of an offence”.

153. As a result, the CICA was unable to indicate to the Committee whether or to what extent Volume III Chapter 18 related to the Magdalen Laundries.

154. As a second step, the Committee requested the CICA Secretariat to write to any women who had complained to it regarding a Magdalen Laundry,

informing them of the existence of the Committee and providing contact details should they wish to make contact. The Committee also studied the Chapter to assess, insofar as possible, which, parts, if any, might possibly have related to the Magdalen Laundries.

155. Chapter 18 of the Ryan Report refers to 25 witnesses before the Confidential Committee, made up of 12 male and 13 female witnesses covering 15 facilities including:

- 5 novitiates
- 4 residential laundries, and
- 3 hostels.

156. As only girls and women were in the Magdalen Laundries, all portions of the Chapter referring to complaints made by males were disregarded by the Committee.

157. There were a number of paragraphs in the Chapter which either include complaints by female witnesses at unspecified categories of institutions or complaints by female witnesses referring to residential laundries. These residential laundries may possibly have been laundries attached to schools, training centres, hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, convents and so on, or alternatively some of them could have been Magdalen Laundries.

- Paragraph 18.25 of the Chapter refers to 7 female witnesses recounting hard physical work in residential laundries; and 3 women giving accounts of physical abuse in residential laundries.¹⁵⁰
- Paragraph 18.30 refers to 1 female witness being sexually abused by an older co-resident in a residential laundry. That complaint is also referred to in paragraph 18.37.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ryan Report, Volume III Chapter 18 Paragraph 18.25

¹⁵¹ Ryan Report, Volume III Chapter 18 Paragraph 18.30 and 18.37

- Paragraph 18.44 includes 2 female witness reports of neglect, while paragraph 18.45 includes 4 female witnesses (at least one of whom related to a residential laundry) concerning neglect of education, social development and emotional wellbeing.¹⁵²
- Para 18.52 refers to reports of emotional abuse.¹⁵³
- Para 18.57 includes reports by females who had been in residential laundries of loss of liberty, social isolation and deprivation of identity.¹⁵⁴
- Paragraph 18.58 set out the reports of two female witnesses of being given a name other than their own when admitted to institutions at 15 years of age.¹⁵⁵
- Paragraph 18.61 includes reports by three witnesses of ‘warnings against men’ having a negative impact on their ability to establish relationships.¹⁵⁶
- Paragraphs 18.70 to 18.73 includes reports of witnesses of positive experiences, including some recreational and social activities, opportunity for friendship, and that the institutions provided respite and protection from physical or sexual abuse experienced in the home.¹⁵⁷

158. In light of the position of the CICA Secretariat, it is not possible for the Committee to determine which, if any, of these paragraphs relate to any of the 10 Magdalen Laundries within the scope of this Report.

¹⁵² Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, Paragraph 18.44 and 18.45

¹⁵³ Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, paragraph 18.52

¹⁵⁴ Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, paragraph 18.57

¹⁵⁵ Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, paragraph 18.58

¹⁵⁶ Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, paragraph 18.61

¹⁵⁷ Ryan Report Volume III Chapter 18, paragraphs 18.70-18.73