

**Introduction by the Independent Chair  
Senator Martin McAleese**

1. There is no single or simple story of the Magdalen Laundries.
2. This Report has established that approximately 10,000 women are known to have entered a Magdalen Laundry from the foundation of the State in 1922 until the closure of the last Laundry in 1996. Of the cases in which routes of entry are known, 26.5% were referrals made or facilitated by the State.
3. Many of the women who met with the Committee - and particularly those who entered the Magdalen Laundries as young girls - experienced the Laundries as lonely and frightening places. For too long, they have been and have felt forgotten. Indeed for many of them, an inability to share their story in the years after their time in a Magdalen Laundry has only added to the confusion and pain they feel about that period in their lives.
4. The mandate of the Inter-Departmental Committee was to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries. These facts are set out in this Report as the Committee has found them. During this fact-finding process, the Committee also gained a deeper and broader understanding of the Magdalen Laundries and the context in which they operated. The Committee has, in this Report, drawn on all available information and sought to record as comprehensive a picture as possible of the operation of the Magdalen Laundries.
5. In doing so, the Committee was conscious that the operation of the Magdalen Laundries since the foundation of the State has, prior to this process, not been fully understood, as many State records were neither readily available nor easily accessible and the records of the Religious Congregations were not available for inspection or analysis.
6. It is understandable that – fuelled by this absence of information – stories grew to fill these gaps. Indeed, the answers to questions as basic as how

many women and girls passed through the Magdalen Laundries or how long they remained there have, until the release of this Report, not been known. Otherwise, the chronicle of the Magdalen Laundries was for many years characterised primarily by secrecy, silence and shame.

7. The picture that the Committee has been able to put together tells the following story. The women who were admitted to and worked in the Magdalen Laundries, whether for short or long periods of time since the foundation of the State, have for too long felt the social stigma of what was sometimes cruelly called the 'fallen woman'. This is a wholly inaccurate characterisation, hurtful to them and their families, that is not borne out by the facts. The Committee found no evidence to support the perception that unmarried girls had babies there, or that many of the women of the Magdalen Laundries since 1922 were prostitutes. The reality is much more complex. As set out in detail in this Report, the women who entered the Magdalen Laundries were from many backgrounds and the circumstances which led to their admission were varied:

- Some women were referred to the Magdalen Laundries by Courts on remand, on probation or otherwise on foot of criminal convictions ranging from vagrancy and larceny to manslaughter and murder.
- Some were children, released on licence from Industrial or Reformatory Schools to the Magdalen Laundries before they reached 16 years of age.
- Some were former Industrial School children referred onwards either directly from these Schools or during the period of their post-discharge supervision.
- Some were young girls who had been boarded-out and were rejected by their foster parents when maintenance payments from the authorities ceased.
- Some were young women over 16 years of age, who had been orphaned or who were in abusive or neglectful homes (in many of

these cases, their younger siblings would have been committed to Industrial Schools).

- Some were women with either mental or physical disabilities which rendered them unable to live independently, at a time when supported living facilities did not exist. Some had psychiatric illnesses and were referred from psychiatric hospitals.
- Some were referred by social services at a time when appropriate accommodation for teenagers was not available.
- Some were simply poor and homeless and either voluntarily sought shelter in or were referred to the Magdalen Laundries by County Homes or, later, by social services.
- Many girls and women were placed in the Magdalen Laundries by their own families, for reasons that we may never know or fully understand, but which included the socio-moral attitudes of the time as well as familial abuse.

These and a myriad other stories make up the background of the women who spent some period of time in a Magdalen Laundry between 1922 and the closure of the last such institution in the State in 1996.

8. The girls and women referred to the Magdalen Laundries by officials in the criminal justice system, social services, or even from psychiatric hospitals and County Homes would have been made aware why they were there and – in the case of court referrals - how long they were required to stay.
9. However, this would not have been the experience of the young girls referred to the Magdalen Laundries from industrial schools or by non-state agents, including girls referred by their own families. None of us can begin to imagine the confusion and fear experienced by these young girls, in many cases little more than children, on entering the Laundries - not knowing why they were there, feeling abandoned, wondering whether they had done something wrong, and not knowing when - if ever - they would get out and see their

families again. It must have been particularly distressing for those girls who may have been the victims of abuse in the family, wondering why they were the ones who were excluded or penalised by being consigned to an institution.

10. To add to this confusion, most found themselves quite alone in what was, by today's standards, a harsh and physically demanding work environment. The psychological impact on these girls was undoubtedly traumatic and lasting. In meeting some of them, and listening to their stories, the Committee was impressed by their quiet determination to find answers to the many questions concerning their lives both before and after entering a Magdalen Laundry.
11. The Committee is aware that there are other women who find it difficult or even impossible to share their stories of the Magdalen Laundries. Some may not have even told their husbands or children of that period in their lives, but instead are carrying those experiences silently in their hearts. Many of these women will choose never to reveal their "secret", because of the impact they fear it might have on their lives. It is the absolute right of every woman to make this choice for herself and the Committee wants to reassure these women that their right to privacy is utterly respected throughout this Report. The Committee nonetheless hopes that the contents of the Report, insofar as it is able to present the facts and set the record straight, may in some small way be of help to them.
12. It is also true to say that many of the Sisters of the four Religious Congregations which operated these institutions – whether they worked in them or not – have experienced a profound hurt in recent years as the debate on the Magdalen Laundries gained increasing public prominence. Their position is that they responded in practical ways as best they could, in keeping with the charism of their Congregations, to the fraught situations of the sometimes marginalised girls and women sent to them, by providing them with shelter, board and work. They state clearly that they did not recruit women for these institutions. The Committee found no evidence to contradict this position.

13. In addition to their legal obligation not to disclose the personal data they hold, the Sisters also continue to feel a strong moral responsibility to protect the privacy of the women who passed through their doors. The Committee believes that it is for this reason, and not for secrecy or self-interest, that their archives, which were so willingly opened to this Committee, have not been opened more broadly to researchers or the general public. The Sisters have, however, consistently made available all the personal records they hold directly to the women concerned or, in the case of deceased women, to their next of kin, when requested, and have confirmed to the Committee their intention to continue to do so in the future.
14. The Congregations informed the Committee that this commitment to ensure anonymity and to protect privacy was also the reason why, in some but not all of the Magdalen Laundries, women were given a “House” or “Class” name which was used instead of their birth name. Many of the women who met the Committee, however, found this practice deeply upsetting and at the time, felt as though their identity was being erased. The Congregations have expressed to the Committee their regret that women who were in their care hold this or other painful memories.
15. This Report examines five main areas in which there was possible State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries. In each case, the Report sets out both the policy and practice as the Committee has found them, as well as the legislative basis for State action (where applicable). The five main areas are:
- Routes by which girls and women entered the Laundries;
  - State inspections of the Laundries;
  - State funding of and financial assistance to the Laundries;
  - Routes by which girls and women left the Laundries;
  - Death registration, burials and exhumations.

In each of these areas, the Committee found evidence of direct State involvement.

16. The Committee's findings regarding each of these areas are outlined in the Executive Summary and detailed in the Report, as are a number of other miscellaneous areas of State involvement including issues relating to electoral registration, insurability of employment, provision in relation to rationing during the Emergency, and industrial surveys under the Census of Distribution and Services.
17. In the course of the Committee's work, material was also uncovered that is central to answering many frequently arising questions concerning the Magdalen Laundries. The Committee is aware that some of this material is, strictly speaking, outside its core remit. However, while mindful of its Terms of Reference, the Committee considered these issues to be consequential on its principal findings and decided, in the public interest, to include these additional findings in a separate section of the Report (Part IV), with relevant statistics contained in the body of the Report at Part II.
18. The material in these sections of the Report and in particular the statistical analysis may also contribute to future historical study and research, without in any way breaching the trust or privacy of the women referred to. It is also likely to be of considerable interest to the women, their families and the wider public. These findings, summarised below, may challenge some common perceptions.

### ***Background of the women who entered the Magdalen Laundries:***

Without identifying any person, the profiles of the women who entered the Magdalen Laundries (including those who were not referred by the State or State agents) are set out in some detail in the Report. These profiles include details on the geographical origin of these women (those who came from rural or urban backgrounds); parental background (whether one or both parents were deceased) and those who had been previously institutionalised.

There is a perception that the vast majority of women who entered the Laundries spent the rest of their lives there - in fact, as set out in this

Report, the majority (61%) spent less than one year there. This and other information is contained in these profiles, including information on the average age on entry, average duration of stay, as well as the minority of women who remained in the Magdalen Laundries until their deaths.

### ***Conditions in the Laundries:***

The Report also addresses the question of the conditions experienced by and the treatment of women in the Laundries, including the questions of sexual abuse, physical abuse and verbal or psychological abuse. This is a particularly sensitive and difficult issue to deal with, made more difficult by the very small sample of women available and in a position to share their experiences with the Committee.

The Committee does not make findings on this issue. Rather, the Report records the stories shared with the Committee by these women, as well as the medical reports and recollections of General Medical Practitioners who served the Laundries in more recent times and others who were closely associated with the operation of the Laundries.

No woman referred to a Magdalen Laundry on foot of a criminal conviction made contact with the Committee. Instead, the majority of the small number of women who engaged with the Committee had been admitted to the Laundries either by a non-state route of referral or, most common of all, following time in an Industrial School.

Many of these women drew a clear distinction between their treatment in Industrial Schools and their experience in the Magdalen Laundries. They made no allegations of sexual abuse against any of the Sisters, but one allegation was made against another woman. The vast majority also told the Committee that the ill-treatment, physical punishment and abuse that was prevalent in the Industrial School system was not something they experienced in the Magdalen Laundries. However, the

majority of women described the atmosphere in the Laundries as cold, with a rigid and uncompromising regime of physically demanding work and prayer, with many instances of verbal censure, scoldings or even humiliating put-downs.

In that regard, some women and others associated with the operation of the Magdalen Laundries told the Committee that the atmosphere “softened” in more recent decades and particularly after the second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Some of the women the Committee met stated clearly that the Laundries were their only refuge in times of great personal difficulty. Others spoke of their real sense of being exploited. But the large majority of women who engaged with the Committee and especially those who had previously been in Industrial Schools spoke of the deep hurt they felt due to their loss of freedom, the fact that they were not informed why they were there, lack of information on when they would be allowed to leave, and denial of contact with the outside world, particularly family and friends.

### ***Financial viability of the Magdalen Laundries:***

The issue of the financial viability of the Magdalen Laundries is also addressed. There have been suggestions that the Laundries were highly profitable institutions. The evidence identified by the Committee and analysis of the financial records of the Magdalen Laundries during various periods of their operation indicate that this was not the case. The Laundries operated for the most part on a subsistence or close to break-even basis rather than on a commercial or highly profitable basis. The financial accounts tend to support the fact that, what came to be known as the Magdalen Laundries, were historically established as refuges, homes or asylums for marginalised women and girls. The subsequent establishment of the Laundries was for the purposes of financially supporting and maintaining them.

19. The members of the Committee approached their work in a committed and professional manner and both they and their Departmental colleagues are due thanks and credit for their considerable efforts. Searching for official records and materials relating to the Magdalen Laundries presented many problems. Information relevant to the Committee's work was contained in a very wide variety of records across many bodies, agencies and individuals. Much of the material held by the State was not archived or catalogued. In this age of instant online searches, it is easy to forget that access to digitised historic material is the exception rather than the rule. Accordingly and to complete their work, members of the Committee and their Departmental colleagues hand-searched paper archives in their Departments, National Archives, the National Library; explored boxes of uncatalogued materials and indeed physically searched Departmental basements in an attempt to discover any misplaced files and folders. Similar detailed searches were conducted in State agencies and bodies. Given the significant efforts made to gather these scattered files and records, the Committee decided to recommend that copies of all official records identified should be preserved as a distinct archive in the Department of An Taoiseach.
20. The Committee wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the tremendous contribution to its work and to the preparation and drafting of this Report by Nuala Ní Mhuircheartaigh. Her work ethic and commitment were outstanding.
21. A large variety of private archives were voluntarily made available to the Committee and it is important to acknowledge that without them the work of the Committee would have proved very difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. In particular and of critical importance to the progress of the Committee's work is the fact that the four Religious Congregations – the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, the Religious Sisters of Charity, and the Sisters of Mercy – voluntarily opened all their records to inspection and analysis and made themselves available at all times to provide the Committee with the fullest information they could.

22. In conducting its work, the Committee also relied heavily on the voluntary co-operation and goodwill of many individuals and organisations. The help and support offered by the Central Statistics Office was invaluable to the process and the assistance offered by private archives, in particular by the Dublin Diocesan Archive and organisations such as the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was significant.
23. A number of former residents of the Magdalen Laundries shared their experiences with the Committee as members of representative and advocacy groups (53), while others did so directly in their own right as individuals (7). Some of these women shared their stories on a strictly confidential basis. A valuable contribution was also made by women (58) who are currently resident in nursing homes under the care of the Religious Congregations.
24. The stories shared with the Committee by these women provided invaluable insights into the operation of the Laundries and helped the Committee greatly in preparing this Report. The majority of them expressed the fact that they had, for many years, felt forgotten and not believed. This took great courage and the Committee acknowledges its indebtedness to them for their contributions and for the dignified way in which they were presented.
25. The representative groups Irish Women's Survivors Network UK and Magdalen Survivors Together and the advocacy group Justice for Magdalenes also made a significant contribution to the work of the Committee. From the outset, they cooperated fully with the Committee, sharing their research, analysis and views.
26. The work of the Committee commenced in July 2011 and took eighteen months in total to complete. The initial preparatory work was carried out within six months, while the substantive research, investigation and drafting of the Final Report was concluded in a further twelve months. No member of the Committee received a salary or stipend in relation to its work. The only direct costs arose from travelling expenses and room hire for meetings. These costs amounted to € 11,146.06.

27. The Committee has produced a substantive and detailed Report, identifying hitherto unknown facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries and clarifying ancillary matters more broadly in the public interest. It is possible that some more detail could be added with more time, but the Committee is of the view that such additional time or probing would, at best, add only marginally to the facts already clearly and unambiguously established in this Report.
28. In light of the Committee's mandate, there is an understandable focus in this Report on the cases of State referral to the Magdalen Laundries, in particular Criminal Justice System and Industrial and Reformatory Schools referrals. The Committee urges a strong word of caution against generalisations in this respect. An unforgivable injustice would be done to the facts and complexity of the story – and more importantly to the women concerned - if public discourse was to simply replace one label with another, by shifting the terminology from that of the 'fallen' to the 'criminal' woman. Respect for the complexity and sensitivity of this story means that any new caricatures of the women who spent time in Magdalen Laundries, or indeed of the Religious Congregations who operated them, must be avoided.
29. The Committee found significant State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries. Its findings in many cases may also encourage a review of some perceptions about these institutions and the women who were admitted to and worked in them. The Committee hopes that the facts established for the first time by its work, and set out in this Report, will contribute to a more complete, accurate and rounded understanding of these issues. Most important of all, the Committee hopes that this Report will be a real step in bringing healing and peace of mind to all concerned, most especially the women whose lived experience of the Magdalen Laundries had a profound and enduring negative effect on their lives.

*Senator Martin McAleese*

*Independent Chair*