

Justice for Magdalenes Challenges Taoiseach After Meeting With Minister for Health

Minister for Health, Mary Harney received evidence of her department's complicity in referring women to Magdalene Laundries from mother and baby homes at a meeting with the survivor advocacy group, Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) today (Thursday 25th March 2010).

At the meeting, JFM presented evidence, dating to the 1930s, that the Department of Local Government and Public Health's official policy was to transfer women from State-funded mother and baby homes and County Homes into Magdalene Laundries. In December 2009 the Department of Justice accepted that the State was always aware that there was no statutory basis for confining women within these institutions.

JFM also raised the issue of the payment of capitation grants by the Health Boards to religious run Magdalene Laundries (amounting to £8.25 per capita per week in July 1972), evidence of which was also presented at the meeting. The Minister has agreed to look into these matters.

This is the third such meeting that JFM has had with government departments where the organisation presented evidence of State complicity in referring women and children to the laundries. In December 2009, the Department of Justice acknowledged its awareness that the courts committed women to Magdalene Laundries as an alternative to prison and that, after the 1960 Criminal Justice Act, women were placed "On Remand" at the Sean McDermott Street laundry. Also, in February 2010, the Department of Education acknowledged its awareness that children were confined within the laundries as late as 1970.

Minister Mary Hanafin, in response to a Parliamentary Question, recently confirmed that the Magdalene Laundries did not make (the then equivalent) PRSI contributions on behalf of Magdalene women. The Minister for Finance, also responding to a Parliamentary Question, declined to respond to a query asking if women incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries paid taxes.

Dr. James Smith, Associate Professor of English and Irish Studies at Boston College and member of JFM's advisory committee said: "Despite admissions of complicity and assurances of interdepartmental cooperation, the Irish State has not been forthcoming with the long overdue apology for the women and children who were denied basic human rights and whose lives were irreversibly damaged by their experiences in the Magdalene Laundries. The State must now do the right thing and issue a meaningful apology without further delay."

As well as demanding an apology, JFM is reiterating its previous calls on the State to produce records for all the women and children it was complicit in referring to the laundries and to enter into dialogue with the four religious congregations involved so that they too might make available their records for all women and children entering Magdalene laundries after 1 January 1900. At the meeting today Minister Harney said she would raise the subject of the Magdalene Laundries at an upcoming government meeting with the religious orders. The Minister said she would also look into the possibility of accessing Census records in order to establish the number of women who were confined in Magdalene Laundries since the 1911 Census.

JFM's PRO Claire McGettrick, who attended today's meeting said: "A strong case has now been made for redress and compensation for Magdalene survivors and the State can no longer claim it had no involvement. Many of the survivors are elderly and others are still living in silence awaiting that apology that will let them know that what happened to them was wrong. There are other women who are buried in unmarked mass graves, some of whom lost children to adoption, and the family members who are now seeking out those women deserve to know what happened to them, and the women deserve to have their stories told."

JFM now calls on An Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D., to provide the necessary political leadership on this issue. He needs to bring his various Ministers and Departments together so as to effect justice for all Magdalene survivors. In particular, Mr. Cowen should issue an official apology and he should work to establish a distinct redress scheme. JFM has irrefutably demonstrated State complicity. Mr Cowen's government must now demonstrate its commitment to justice for all Irish citizens.

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