

Justice for Magdalenes

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Magdalene survivors – informal testimony given to Justice for Magdalenes (JFM)

JFM has collated the information below as a sample of the testimony given us by various Magdalene survivors who have contacted us over the years, primarily through our helpline. Names have been changed and other identifying/sensitive information has been removed/slightly altered to protect the survivors. Though identifying details have been redacted, we respectfully request that this document is held in the strictest of confidence and not distributed, out of respect to the survivors and their families.

Mary's Testimony

Mary is an elderly survivor who is married with children. Her primary concern is to protect those (now adult) children as she does not want them to have to live with the stigma she bears as a Magdalene Laundry survivor. Mary was originally sent to an industrial school in the midlands, but was removed to a psychiatric hospital because she challenged a nun. From there she was sent to a Dublin based Magdalene Laundry where a nun gave her a beating on her first night there. She was still a child at this point and for many years thought her name was Satan because that is how the nuns addressed her.

Mary went to the Residential Institutions Redress Board (RIRB) because of the time she spent at the industrial school. She offers a disturbing account of her experience at the RIRB, with the religious orders that ran the industrial school insinuating that she was promiscuous, resulting in Mary having to supply sensitive and very personal medical records which proved the nuns wrong. The RIRB was not at all interested in hearing about Mary's time in the Magdalene Laundry. Mary says she was depressed for a year after the RIRB - she received compensation eventually (for her time in the industrial school), but the experience took a huge toll on her.

Mary also spoke of how in recent years she received a phone call and asked to visit a nun from her childhood. The nun said she wanted to see how Mary turned out and asked her to bring her children. The real purpose of the meeting became transparent when the nun sat Mary down and told her that people were telling lies about what happened. She asked Mary for help, would she vouch for them. Mary declined.

Above all, Mary wanted to talk, to tell her story. The RIRB denied her this opportunity and she feels unable to talk to most people about the subject. Her testimony is a typical example of the women we have met, who have been transferred from industrial schools to Magdalene Laundries. Unfortunately Mary is not the only survivor we have encountered who was transferred to the laundry via a psychiatric institution.

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Ann's Testimony

Ann is an elderly woman, who despite great adversity in her life, has managed to raise seven children, of whom she is incredibly proud. Ann was transferred from a Mother and Baby Home to a laundry run by the same order after she had given birth.

Ann only managed to escape the laundry by going on hunger strike – she had escaped before but a nun brought her back.

Like so many other survivors, Ann has multiple physical ailments as a direct result of being in the laundry and ironically, because of her experiences, she is terrified of hospitals, so when she is in for her frequent treatments she cannot wait to get out. Again, like some other survivors, she ended up in an abusive marriage.

Ann remembers the names of many of the women who were with her in the laundry, though she emphasises that many of those are house names.

Patrick's Testimony

Patrick is a gentleman in his forties who approached Justice for Magdalenes seeking help on his quest to piece together his mother's life. His mother Joan died in 1973 when Patrick was just ten years old and he is now trying to gain some understanding of what happened to her. Patrick had not been aware that his mother was in a Magdalene Laundry prior to his research and he has given us permission to share his testimony.

Joan was sentenced to four years in an industrial school in Limerick in 1936. Her mother had died the year before and she was picked up for wandering and having a parent who did not exercise proper guardianship. As a result, Joan's father had to pay one shilling and sixpence.

However, only two weeks later Joan was transferred to the Good Shepherd Magdalene Laundry in Cork. Though she had originally been sentenced to four years, she was not released from Cork until six years later and only then because her father came for her.

Patrick feels very angry that his mother was incarcerated for two years longer than she should have been. He is even angrier because instead of the State giving her a better life, Joan was sent "to be a slave to the nuns" at Sundays Well in Cork, where she was forced to work for no pay rather than being given an education.

At almost eighteen years old, Joan emerged from the laundry illiterate and would remain so for the rest of her life. She entered an abusive marriage and had 6 children in close succession. Joan died of breast (and other forms of) cancer in 1973 and Patrick tells us that due to lack of education she did not know she was dying "until she drew her last breath". Patrick feels that had Joan been educated she may have known to see a doctor earlier before her cancer set in and she might have had a chance to be saved.

In the course of his search for information, Patrick has encountered many brick walls, being only offered scant information at times. A small paragraph is all that is offered by the order to describe

six years in the Magdalene Laundry. Patrick said he couldn't help but feel angry as he watched celebrities tracing their roots on RTÉ's *Who Do You Think You Are?* programme, as they received their information with such ease.

Patrick is not taking this journey for financial gain, he is merely seeking the truth about what happened to his mother and wants somebody in an official capacity to acknowledge that what happened to her is wrong.

Bridget's Testimony

Bridget's mother died while she was an infant and upon reaching her teenage years, Bridget's father worried that she might get into trouble so he looked into sending her away to school. A certain school in Dublin (which we now know operated as a laundry) came highly recommended to Bridget's father (the recommendation came from a nun) and he sent her there, not knowing what fate was in store for her.

We asked Bridget if she had received any education at all and she said they never even saw a pencil – the only education she has ever received is from primary school, but in the laundry she just worked all the time. When her father visited, he was brought into the parlour and was told that Bridget was doing very well. Bridget was put into her own clothes during these visits so her father never suspected anything was wrong.

Bridget said she was quite delicate as a teenager and she fainted a lot, especially in mass and she found herself fainting every morning at the (compulsory) mass. She said she also fainted a lot in the room where she worked. The work she had to do was quite heavy and she said it was too difficult for her.

Bridget's story is a fairly typical example of the experiences of survivors who were deprived of an education. What makes Bridget's case even more disturbing is the nuns' blatant deception of her father, who thought he was doing his best for his daughter.

Siobhan's Testimony

Siobhan was transferred from an industrial school to a Magdalene Laundry as a punishment for trying to run away. She was there for almost a year and only got out because someone came for her.

Siobhan has been to the RIRB for her time in the industrial school and received compensation, but they would not acknowledge her time in the laundry. In fact, the Department of Education has no record that she was ever moved to the laundry, the records show that she spent her whole time in the industrial school.

Siobhan wants her time in the laundry acknowledged because she says the year she spent there was much worse than her whole time in the industrial school. Siobhan was only a teenager when she went in and was absolutely terrified, because from her perspective everyone was much older and she says many of the women had significant psychiatric problems. Years ago, teenagers were a lot more innocent, so it must have been a truly terrifying experience for her.

Siobhan says that they were drugged and were not allowed to wear shoes in case they would run away. She added that they would not get much of a chance to escape, given that there were bars on the windows. Siobhan says she was strapped to a bed in what looked like a psychiatric unit and was terrified by a girl who had been transferred from the courts for throwing a pot of tea on someone. She would hit her while she was strapped to the bed and would try to tear the clothes off her -at one point an elderly survivor had to save her from this girl.

Like so many Magdalene survivors who also spent time in industrial schools, the lack of acknowledgement at the RIRB of Siobhan's time in the laundry has had a huge effect on her.

Margaret's Testimony

Margaret was transferred from an industrial school to a Magdalene Laundry. She eventually managed to escape and got a job in a local hospital, but one day a nun arrived, summoned her and brought her to two waiting Gardaí who escorted her to another laundry in the same city. After some time, Margaret was transferred to another laundry in a different county.

Margaret eventually got out and emigrated to the UK. Despite all she has been through in her life, Margaret educated herself in the UK. She went to the RIRB and though her time in the industrial school was considered, like so many others, Margaret's time in the laundries was not taken into account- even by her own solicitor, who refused to afford her any sort of hope or compassion that her time in the laundries would be acknowledged.

Rosemary's Testimony

Rosemary's mother was an unmarried mother who was put into prison for begging. Her mother was subsequently sent to a Magdalene Laundry and her children put into care. Rosemary spent her childhood living beside her mother (in the industrial school adjacent to the laundry) yet, she never knew her.

Rosemary feels like a huge part of her life was taken away from her, having been deprived of a sense of family and the chance to know her mother. Sadly, her story is not unique, where mothers and children grew up beside each other in Magdalene Laundries and industrial schools without ever meeting.

We know from speaking to other survivors as well as others that it was not unusual for mothers and children to live in close proximity to each other – one in the industrial school, the other in the laundry – yet never seeing each other. Survivors have told us that at mass in one particular institution, the two groups would sit opposite each other, with the mothers trying to guess which child was theirs.

Pauline's Testimony

Pauline was not a Magdalene, but worked in an administrative capacity in a laundry. Pauline offered a unique perspective on daily life in the laundry and despite the fact that she has no contact with the survivors who are in touch with JFM, her testimony complemented and corroborated with testimony obtained from survivors who were incarcerated in the same laundry.

Not being directly involved in the trauma, Pauline was able to give vivid descriptions of what she witnessed, which brought previous survivor testimonies to life.

Pauline remembers the women and girls crying at Christmas because they received no cards - any letters they ever received were withheld. She remembers the young girls (who would come up from one particular industrial school), huddled together, hugging each other in pure terror because the older women would frighten them. (This is exactly what other survivors have told us.) She particularly remembers (and names) two sets of sisters. The older women would bully the young girls, sometimes throwing buckets of bleach on them.

Though Pauline did not handle money, she saw the account books and says **the local bishop was in receipt of all funds**. It was her responsibility to put the addresses on the parcels, along with prices - the Magdalenes were not allowed to perform any administrative tasks.

Pauline says that at meals, the Magdalenes were never given meat. She says **the nuns were well fed but the girls were rooting in bins for food**. Pauline helped three girls escape in 1959, putting them up for a while and giving them clothes. She remembers their names.

Pauline remembers how one woman cried desperately for her son who was taken from her. She said there were often fights amongst the women, because they were so frustrated and institutionalised. One particular incident was so serious it was not spoken about among the women; however someone was sent to a nearby psychiatric hospital. In another incident an older woman cut a young girl on each side of her mouth with a razor. The older woman ended up in the psychiatric hospital and Pauline doesn't know what became of the girl.

There was a man who worked at the laundry who was kind to the girls; however the nuns had a hold over him because the house he lived in belonged to the laundry and if he put a foot out of line, he would have lost his home.

Pauline said there was a lack of trust among the Magdalenes themselves, who feared telling each other anything because the other person might (and often did) tell one of the nuns.

Pauline remembers the army laundry being processed. She says that everyone was locked in - even Pauline herself - while she worked. While they worked the nuns said the rosary. They were not allowed to show flesh, just their arms.

Pauline remembers many of the names of the nuns and **also names a (now deceased) local sergeant who was involved in returning escaped girls**.

The Magdalenes had a small bit of recreation on Sundays where they were allowed to borrow the radio; however Pauline was at pains to insist that this was by no means sufficient rest time and was not to be construed as "fun" in any normal terms.

Sometimes the girls would, as they called it, go "on the ran", i.e. they would hide from work. Pauline would cover for them, even though it got her into trouble. She heard years later that

there were many tears shed when she left the laundry. Interestingly, we received testimony from another survivor who was in a different laundry who also used the phrase “*on the ran*”.

Pauline says The Magdalene Sisters film does not come close to the reality of what happened

Fiona’s Testimony

Note: Since this testimony was given, Sinéad has been relocated to a more suitable location. The testimony is offered as an example of the plight of institutionalised Magdalene survivors.

Fiona is a friend of Sinéad, a woman who remains institutionalised as a result of her incarceration in a Magdalene Laundry. Sinead was transferred to the laundry from an industrial school. Fiona brings Sinéad out every week and Sinéad lives for these outings. Sinéad would love to go to a local tourist attraction, however the nuns have her money and will not give it to her.

Fiona says Sinéad has no quality of life whatsoever, the nuns bully her, take all her money (disability and non-contributory pension) and only rarely give her an allowance. They will not give her money for her day trips and whatever she receives she is grateful to the nuns for. Fiona says she does not understand that the nuns are giving her money out of her own funds.

Fiona pleaded Sinéad's case to the head nun, however Sinéad's lifestyle remains unchanged. Because the nuns refuse to pass on phone calls to Sinéad, Fiona got her a mobile phone, however the nun was abrupt with Fiona and said they didn't want Sinéad to have the mobile. Thankfully, Fiona resisted.

Sinéad's world revolves around her dolls, known as her “babies”. While Sinéad was on holidays (in Knock) the nuns removed her dolls, put them in a cupboard and told her she would have to give them to Haiti. Sinéad was heartbroken, so put all the dolls in a bag and gave them to Fiona in case they took them on her. The nuns have removed more of Sinéad’s belongings, hence Sinéad has taken to giving bags of items to Fiona for safe keeping.

The nuns occupy the entire building where they all live while Sinéad has a small bedroom and eats in a scullery.

The nuns enjoy regular day trips, however they never take Sinéad and try to discourage Fiona from taking Sinéad out, saying “she is not safe”, “she is afraid of dogs” and, significantly, “**she has work to do**”. Sinéad's hands are constantly blistered from being in hot water. One night when Fiona brought Sinéad home late, the nun attacked her in front of Sinéad.

Sinéad is not the only institutionalised survivor who is being forced to work. We have received many reports from various places that indicate this is common practice. Unfortunately we cannot always share the exact details of testimony shared with us, as people often do so at great risk to their livelihood.

Gráinne’s Testimony

Gráinne contacted us about her friend Úna, who is a Magdalene survivor, who is being mentally

and emotionally abused in a nursing home part of an old laundry. Úna was transferred to the laundry after a failed fostering arrangement.

Úna had been living in a sheltered accommodation section, however one day she was moved with no warning, consultation or explanation, leaving half of her belongings behind, which she never saw again. Úna's entire world had been uprooted, but those responsible for her at the nursing home did not seem to care.

On one occasion when Gráinne visited, Úna was upset. When they went down to her room, they found staff members dividing up Úna's clothes and belongings as they claimed she had too many things, requiring two chests of drawers as opposed to one. The contents of the drawers constitute Úna's entire life and are all she has known since her teenage years.

Úna has also had difficulty in obtaining medical assistance.

Other Testimony

- Friends of institutionalised survivors frequently report that survivors' pensions are taken from them, that the only treat the women get is a trip to the Knock Shrine once a year and that often, any gifts given to the women are taken away by the nuns.
- Grace was transferred from an industrial school to one laundry and subsequently on to two others. Grace told us a social worker was involved in one of her transfers between laundries. Grace did not say how she came to leave the laundry.
- Eibhlis was transferred from an industrial school and remains institutionalised. Eibhlis's was given a letter one day from her mother, who was also a Magdalene (in a different laundry) and who was "searching" for her for years (her mother had also remained in the nuns' charge), but by the time the letter was handed over, Eibhlis's mother had died, behind convent walls.
- Aisling was put into the laundry by the Legion of Mary for no apparent reason. Her name was taken from her and replaced with a number. She was transferred to another laundry in a different part of the country. ~~When she escaped, she was returned by the Gardai.~~
- Niamh, who was in the laundry since she was thirteen (and remains institutionalised) suffered horrific injuries at the hands of a nun (she named the nun to the person who testified to us). Niamh had surgery (only in recent years) to rectify some of the long term problems associated with her injuries. We received detailed descriptions of the issues associated with Niamh's injuries however we cannot share them as they would identify both Niamh and the person who testified to us.
- Aoife is also institutionalised and suffers chronic pain from an old injury resulting from being pushed down a flight of stairs.