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Honors Thesis  
Spring 2021

**The Magdalen Laundries: Holding Irish Society to Account for the  
Treatment of Fallen Women**

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May 2021

**Abstract**

The Magdalen Laundries, or Magdalen Asylums, operated from the eighteenth century to 1996 in Ireland. In 1993 a major scandal erupted when 155, originally 133, unidentified bodies were found in a mass grave on the convent grounds. Eventually, news broke to the Irish public that the “fallen women,” who were sent to the laundries for having children out of wedlock or deviating from societal norms in any other ways, were actually being abused mentally and physically by the nuns running the facilities. When the laundries first began operating, they started out as rehabilitation centers for women to come and go to learn to live better lives by Irish Catholic standards and eventually, the women were sentenced to the laundries by court orders to work for the Irish public. Historians have cited the Magdalen Laundries for arguments surrounding a lack of accountability from the Irish Church and State, reproductive justice and domesticity, and Ireland’s reliance on contemporary slavery. This paper will argue the level to which the Irish public should be held accountable for being complicit and upholding the social norms that landed the women in the laundries. This question is important to answer because this framework can be used for more modern events and cases of oppression that still impact us today.

*Key Words:* History; Journalism; Magdalen Laundries; Fallen women; Accountability; Ireland

## Introduction

Lacking the resources needed to keep their doors open, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a Catholic Charity dedicated for over a century to serving women in need, found themselves forced to sell their properties. That was in 1993. The property developer who purchased the land, beginning to dig for new construction, found evidence of a mass burial. It seems that the nuns who ran the laundry for centuries had secretly buried 133 unidentified bodies. Headlines in the Irish Times read “Exhumed Women: Memorial Service Demand.”<sup>1</sup> In 2003, 22 more bodies were found in the grave making the total 155 unidentified women.<sup>2</sup>

As an unfortunate set of events in Irish history, the case of the Magdalen Laundries recalls the kind of institutional self-satisfaction, scapegoating, and hubris that have so excited social theorists like Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and others since the 1970s. Unfortunately, it continues to offer lessons for today’s social ills, ranging from homophobia to racism. This paper examines the Magdalen laundries, first to recall their terrible history, then to evaluate their legacy. I begin by offering background on the Magdalen laundries, describing what they were, how they operated, and when and how they transformed from places of refuge for wayward women into prisons imposing work regimes. Then, I look at how women were sent to and treated at

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<sup>1</sup> “Exhumed Women: Memorial Service Demand.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/94/1/Bundle7Tab196.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> “Magdalen Plot had Remains of 155 Women.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/91/1/Bundle7Tab201.pdf>

the laundries. Finally, I argue how Irish society should take accountability for this event since the public was complicit with sending young women to these institutions.

The Magdalen Laundries (also called the Magdalen Asylums) originally acted as rehabilitation homes for “fallen women,” but quickly, their operators turned them into asylums, places to impose abuse and a work regime approximating slavery. The laundries operated from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until as late as the 1990s. They took their name from the biblical figure, Mary Magdalen, who, as an “attractive sinner turned saint,” offered a model of redemption to Ireland’s wayward women.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of their history the asylums housed as many as 30,000 women. Some had given birth to children outside of wedlock, some had committed crimes. Many had grown up in orphanages or had no family with whom to live. In either case, they simply did not fit within the Irish Catholic domestic role for women. The women confined in the laundries performed domestic labor for the Irish public like doing laundry and sewing.

The transformation of the Magdalen Laundries from refuges for outcast women to asylums in which their managers abused the women inside is a painful story. Despite good intentions, protective asylums for outcast women became settings for exploitation and abuse. In the beginning, many women went to the laundries voluntarily, to seek support, to improve their condition, or to seek work by which they could better themselves. Inside the laundries, they performed domestic labor for the Irish public like doing laundry and sewing. Over time, however, the laundries became oppressive.

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, James M. "The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report (1931)." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (2004): 208-33. Accessed September 15, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704856>. 22

Although their initial intention was to assist women who had fallen outside the norms of social decorum, acted as a tool to the fact is that they further ostracized their worker-occupants.

Records show that by the 1920's the nuns who ran the laundries grew increasingly bitter and about and brutal toward the women in their care.<sup>4</sup> They beat the women living there, essentially forcing them into a work regime. Working the women ever longer hours against their will, essentially forcing them into a form of slavery for the Irish public in that they worked against their will, they also separated the women from their children.

Ireland had created multiple institutions for the care of wayward women. These other institutions included mother-baby homes, reformatory schools, mental asylums, and adoption agencies. Like the laundries, these too became vehicles for repression. to oppress these "fallen women" besides the laundries. Over time, the women sent to work in the laundries eventually served what amounted to prison sentences, with the women serving longer sentences over time, sometimes due to their being transferred from one institution to another. It wasn't uncommon for women to be sentenced to work in a laundry by court order and some records show that when their sentences would be almost up, local courts would sentence them to another institution.

### **The Magdalen laundries in the Context of Other Histories of Systemic Abuse**

The norms of Ireland's Catholic and patriarchal society incur much of the blame

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, James M. *Magdalen Laundries: and The Nation's Architecture of Containment*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 42.

for what happened. The laundries were able to operate in the way they did because of the patriarchal attitude society held towards the women at the time. So, how could the Irish society allow for the human rights violations that occurred within the Magdalen Asylums happen? This is a big question to answer and it requires us to evaluate everyday societal and moral norms and how we are complicit by participating in and upholding these norms.

### **Theories of Socially-sanctioned Abuse**

The functionalist theory argues that the organization of society is more important than the individual, meaning people are born into a society and become a product of the social influences around them. These institutions include family structures, media, education and religion. Theorist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about “habitus” which are ingrained habits and skills that defines how individuals see the world. Mary Douglas’ “Purity and Danger” and Michael Foucault’s book “Discipline and Punish” establish theories on societal norms and power dynamics within society. Every society has its own norms and punishments for straying from these standards, and when we evaluate events from the past and present, we have to ask whether the functionalist theory works.

Although the human rights violations caused by the Magdalen Laundries took place in Ireland from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, recent events in U.S. history share its characteristics of containment. Certain groups of people, separated by race and sexuality, have been oppressed for straying away from societal standards similar to the way women in Ireland were oppressed for having children outside of marriage.

Conversion therapy, a form of “treatment” aimed to change a person’s sexuality or gender identity, has been used globally in attempt to preserve the idea that being homosexual is an undesirable trait.<sup>5</sup> Tactics for conversion therapy in the west included icepick lobotomies, chemical castration, electric shock, administering nausea-inducing drugs while presenting homoerotic stimuli, and reconditioning. More modern tactics of conversion therapy include counseling, visualization, social-skills training, psychoanalytic therapy, and religious interventions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Christian religion promoted conversion therapy as a cure for homosexuality for gay men and women.<sup>6</sup> The practice has gained a reputation of being associated with religion, because of the belief that homosexuality is a sin: “individuals who have strong religious beliefs can experience tensions and conflicts between their ideal self and beliefs and their sexual and affectional needs and desires.”<sup>7</sup> The constraints that dominant religions, and society as a whole put on LGBTQ+ people make them feel shame and enforce the belief that there is something wrong with them and they have to change. This is similar to the idea that the women in the laundries had to be admitted to institutions in order to better themselves.

The practice is based on the outdated belief that homosexuality is a mental illness and can be cured even though homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and

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<sup>5</sup> Lockhart, D. W. (2021, March 4). 'Conversion therapy left me emotionally traumatised. BBC. Retrieved March 20, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-56260726>

<sup>6</sup> MERRITT, J. (2015, April 15). How Christians Turned Against Gay Conversion Therapy. The Atlantic. Retrieved March 20, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/how-christians-turned-against-gay-conversion-therapy/390570/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or the DSM, in 1973.<sup>8</sup> In America about 698,000 adults have received the shame-based therapy and about 16,000 LGBTQ+ youth will go through therapy before they are 18 years old in the states that still haven't banned the practice.<sup>9</sup> Conversion therapy can be conducted by licensed professionals, unlicensed ministries, and life coaches in individual or group settings.<sup>10</sup> The therapy is inherently harmful to LGBTQ+ Americans because the practice is based on shame for something they cannot control. The American Journal of Public Health has declared that conversion therapy causes detrimental effects and is unethical because it has been linked to elevated levels of suicidal tendencies among LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>11</sup>

California was the first state to ban conversion therapy for minors in 2013 and since then, 20 states have followed suit. However, the LGBTQ+ fight for acceptance has been long-standing in America since gay marriage was only made legal on the federal level in 2015 with the supreme court case *Obergefell v. Hodges*.<sup>12</sup> Despite the U.S. making strides for the LGBTQ+ community, many youth members of the community still fear disapproval from their families and community and still risk being victims of hate

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<sup>8</sup> About Conversion Therapy. (2021, February 18). Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-involved/trevor-advocacy/50-bills-50-states/about-conversion-therapy/>

<sup>9</sup> Thisisloyal.com, L. (2020, May 21). Conversion therapy and Lgbt youth. Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/conversion-therapy-and-lgbt-youth/>

<sup>10</sup> About Conversion Therapy. (2021, February 18). Retrieved April 08, 2021, from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-involved/trevor-advocacy/50-bills-50-states/about-conversion-therapy/>

<sup>11</sup> Green, Amy, Casey Pick, Samuel Dorison, and Myeshia Price-Feeney. "Self-Reported Conversion Efforts and Suicidality Among US LGBTQ Youths and Young Adults, 2018." American Public Health Association (APHA) publications, July 8, 2020. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305701>.

<sup>12</sup> "A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: A Timeline of the Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage in the U.S." Guides. Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/c.php?g=592919&p=4182201>.

crimes.<sup>13</sup> By going against religious and societal norms, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary people are still at risk of shame even though their sexualities and gender identities cause no harm to others.

The U.S. criminal justice system also an example of how society can oppress a particular group. The make-up of the prison population is overwhelmingly Black and systematic racism in the U.S. provides the context to show that this is clear oppression of Black Americans. Systematic racism is intersectional which shows presents a racial gap in education, crime, employment, and communities, making this an economic issue as well as a human rights issue. Since this racism is not overt and instead has been weaved into American institutions, it's hard to see to those not impacted by it. This form of oppression has some resemblance the situation in Ireland, in that the laundries were only one aspect of Ireland's expansive interlocking system to control women and children.<sup>14</sup>

Many systematic issues show up in the U.S. legal system, separating a large amount of POC from the rest of society. In a report specifically analyzing the Massachusetts court system, Harvard University research found that people of color (POC) are overly represented in Massachusetts state prisons.<sup>15</sup> The research found that Black and Latinx people received longer sentences compared to their white counterparts because they are more likely to have their cases settled in superior courts causing the

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<sup>13</sup> Youn, Soo. "Recent LGBTQ Attacks Highlight Hate Crimes." ABC News, June 8, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/recent-lgbtq-attacks-highlight-hate-crimes/story?id=63575407>.

<sup>14</sup> Raftery, Mary; Eoin O'Sullivan (1999). *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools*. Dublin: New Island. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Tsai Bishop, Elizabeth, Brook Hopkins, Chijindu Obiofuma, and Felix Owusu. *Rep. Racial Disparities in the Massachusetts Criminal System*, n.d. 4.

longer sentences.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, POC are more likely to be charged with drug-related crimes.<sup>17</sup> We can even see that POC are punished to greater lengths compared to white people for similar crimes. Tanya McDowell, a homeless Black woman, was sentenced to five years in prison for lying and sending her son to the wrong school district. On the other hand, Lori Loughlin was sentenced to prison for two months and Felicity Hoffman served 14 days in prison for their involvement in the college admission scandal. McDowell's case has some clear differences to Hoffman and Loughlin's case because after she was charged with federal larceny for lying about her son's school district, McDowell was arrested again for offering drugs and sex workers to undercover cops which landed her the five-year sentence.<sup>18</sup> Hoffman and Loughlin didn't have a previous criminal record unlike McDowell, which may have influenced the court's decision to give her a longer sentence. However, it is also crucial to note that McDowell was also homeless, which could provide context to her criminal record. In the U.S., homeless people are tied to more crimes as victims and perpetrators because many of their crimes are "survival-based" like theft.<sup>19</sup> McDowell's previous crime was a bank robbery and her crimes after included selling drugs and sex workers. The crimes McDowell are inherently economic and there is a strong possibility that she committed them for her own survival.

In extension to the U.S. justice system, Black people are disproportionately killed

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>18</sup> Palma, Bethania. "Did Tanya McDowell Get 5 Years for Sending Her Son to a Better School While Felicity Huffman Got 14 Days?" Snopes.com, December 28, 2020. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/tanya-mcdowell-felicity-huffman/>.

<sup>19</sup> MAYER, CHRISTOPHER, and JESSICA REICHERT. "The Intersection of Homelessness and the Criminal Justice System." ICJIA Research Hub. Accessed April 9, 2021. <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/the-intersection-of-homelessness-and-the-criminal-justice-system>.

by police in the U.S. According to research released by Yale University in 2020, Black people were murdered at a 2.6 times rate compared to white people.<sup>20</sup> The murder of George Floyd over the summer sparked global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and the Donald Trump administration framed these protests as violent riots. However, ACLED data showed that 93% of BLM protests were non-violent and the government response was more violent.<sup>21</sup> The government used force against the peaceful protestors:

Overall, ACLED data indicate that government forces soon took a heavy-handed approach to the growing protest movement. In demonstrations where authorities are present, they use force more often than not. Data show that they have disproportionately used force while intervening in demonstrations associated with the BLM movement, relative to other types of demonstrations.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, when an overwhelmingly white group stormed and invaded the capital in protest of the 2020 election results, the government responded differently: “The police response to the Capitol unrest was a stark contrast to law enforcement’s approach to peaceful protests against racial injustice during the summer.”<sup>23</sup> Rioters were violent to law enforcement present, but many of the police were unarmed to serve as traffic control, something that wasn’t present during the BLM protests.

The examples of conversion therapy and systematic racism in the U.S. justice system provide context for the containment culture the Magdalen Laundries should be viewed from. All

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<sup>20</sup>Lambert, Ben. “Yale: Black People 'Disproportionately Killed' by Police over Last 5 Years.” *New Haven Register*. New Haven Register, November 1, 2020. <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Yale-Black-people-disproportionately-15682869.php>.

<sup>21</sup> Roudabeh, Kishi: “Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020.” ACLED, February 11, 2021. <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Myung-Gyun Lim. “Regional Overview: United States: 13 December 2020-8 January 2021.” ACLED, February 22, 2021. <https://acleddata.com/2021/01/14/regional-overview-united-states13-december-8-january-2020/>.

three examples show how societal norms, dominate groups, and belief systems can control the narrative for what is right and wrong and those enforcing these beliefs can issue punishments for breaking these norms.

### **Theories of constraint: Containment Culture and The Laundries**

James Smith attributes this attitude towards unmarried mothers and other women who strayed from the moral ideal, to Ireland's containment culture:

James F. Cassidy, himself a Catholic priest, captured the inherent contradictions informing contemporary Irish attitudes toward women's virtue and outlined the ramifications for those women who violated the social and moral ideal. Branded by the public as simultaneously a mother and a criminal, a family member and an outcast, the unmarried mother faced shame, betrayal, and exile. With little or no social welfare system to fall back on, her choices were limited to entering the county home, begging on the streets, or possibly resorting to prostitution.<sup>24</sup>

Parents and family members often surrendered these usually individuals to live and work in these institutions run by the Catholic church. Additionally, orphans and children convicted of crimes lived in reformatory schools also run by the church, which contributed to systematic child abuse. This attitude, enforced by the government, is highlighted in government documents. A Department of Local Government and Board of Health report from 1933 referred to unmarried mothers as "weak minded and in need of supervision and protection."<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the laundries and institutions similar,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, Ciara. "The Construction of Teenage Parenting in the Republic of Ireland." In *Re/Assembling the Pregnant and Parenting Teenager: Narratives from the Field*, edited by Kamp Annelies and McSharry Majella, 147-72. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2018. Accessed September 14, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/stable/j.ctv2t4b9h.10>. 154.

functioned as a way to separate members of society deemed “weak” and “disgraced” from the rest of society.

Over a 150-year period up until 1996, Ireland sentenced thousands of “disgraced” women who did not fit the Irish-Catholic values to work in the Magdalen Laundries. These women subjected to labor for the Irish public, beaten by nuns, and in some cases weren’t allowed to speak. However, Ireland faced a massive scandal when a mass grave filled with unmarked bodies of women and children found on the grounds of a closed institution in 1993. The discovery caused massive backlash and the ultimate closure of the rest of the institutions by 1996. By analyzing why these women were subjected to abuse within the laundries, the Irish government’s involvement during the laundries’ operation, and the government’s statements of accountability after their closing, we can see how the value of these “fallen” women shifted in Irish-Catholic society. Additionally, the Magdalen Laundries are just one example of a systemic institution starting off with good intentions and then contorted into an outlet for oppression.

## **Methodology**

For my research, I used a combination of primary and secondary sources. My secondary sources outside of papers written by historians mainly consist of newspaper articles written about the laundries after their closing and after the mass graves had been uncovered. My primary sources include verbal and transcribed interviews from some survivors of the laundries, newspaper advertisements for the laundries and the work the women provided the public, a document detailing the Irish government’s involvement in the operation of the laundries, and pictures depicting life inside the laundries. The pictures show the nuns watching the children

who had been separated from their mothers in the laundries and the mother's dormitories. These sources help my research by offering different accounts of the laundries to contribute to a whole picture life inside the laundries and how society viewed these women.

My research on the laundries has presented me with both successes and challenges in terms of finding sources to help answer these important questions. My research has been successful in finding a large variety of sources to help me piece together an accurate account of what happened in the laundries and why this human rights violation occurred. Although I did not expect the Magdalen Laundries to be a very popular topic that would provide me with a lot of material to work with, I found an archive dedicated to the subject, photos from the adoption rights alliance, first-hand accounts, and books. Additionally, since the Magdalen Laundries are not a widely researched topic by historians, I found it fairly easy to establish new arguments and ideas relating to the topic.

Despite the successes, I still faced many challenges while dealing with the topic of the laundries. Firstly, some of the primary sources I found have not been kept in good condition, so they could not be used for my research. Secondly, there is not a lot of access to these primary sources still because the churches still do not allow access to their historical archives. As James Smith writes in his book, *"Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment"*:

This book is not the history of the Magdalen laundries in twentieth century Ireland. Indeed, no such history can exist until the religious congregations afford scholars access to their archival records—"penitent" registers and convent annals--of women entering the

asylums after 1900.<sup>26</sup>

Since there are limited records from the church, the narrative on the Magdalen regime and all of the institutions within it are a bit confusing to piece together. Newspaper articles and documentaries help with this issue to some extent, however, documenting a complete and accurate history of all these institutions and their inner workings is almost impossible at this point. I am also aware that some of the children of the women forced into the laundries were put up for adoption in other countries such as the United States, separating them from their biological families. However, I found no written evidence of the adoptions. Evidence of these adoptions could have been especially helpful for me to further establish that the events that took place at the laundries were a human and reproductive rights violation by providing proof that these children were forcibly separated from their mothers because they have been born out of a “shameful” pregnancy.

With my sources, this paper will set out to answer three important questions. Firstly, my paper will answer the question of how the representation of the laundries changed before and after they shut down. My analysis of the media’s coverage of the Magdalen Asylums will help make this distinction between their representation and thus public’s perception of these institutions clear. Second, this paper will answer why overtime the women forced to work in the laundries were forced into serving longer sentences overtime. This question is important because it addresses how the laundries shifted from rehabilitation institutions to a system forcing lower class Irish women into slavery. Lastly, my paper will answer the question of how the relationship between the church and state has changed in Ireland before and after the centuries-

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<sup>26</sup> Smith, James M. *Magdalen Laundries: and The Nation's Architecture of Containment*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 16.

long institution of the laundries. This will help show how seriously the Irish Government has accepted their level of accountability, because since the church was so intertwined with the government, the laundries did not need to adhere to certain health codes and documentation standards.

## **Historiography**

Historians generally agree that the purpose of the institutions excluded these “fallen women” from a society that thought their inclusion might diminish the ideal of Irish Catholic domesticity. Although the history of the Irish Magdalen Laundries is fairly new, with their permanent closure in 1996, historians have extensively covered the topic with different ideas and viewpoints. The different ideas surrounding the Magdalen Asylums include accountability, slavery, and reproductive justice. Arguments about accountability usually deal with the Irish Government and the Catholic Church because they are the most obvious offenders because of all of the documents that prove their involvement. The Irish Government allowed the laundries to not adhere to health laws, document deaths, and not supply the children in a proper education, which allowed the laundries to turn into a system for evil.<sup>27</sup> The argument regarding slavery is important because it is easy to not consider the Magdalen Laundries as an example of slavery since these women were not bought and sold. However, these women did have their rights stripped from them while subjected to forced labor for the benefit of others, making the laundries a more subtle example of slavery.

My secondary sources included news articles, journals, and books. Some of my sources

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<sup>27</sup> “Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries - The Department of Justice and Equality.” Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/SP13000074>.

are academic pieces written by historians while others are not. My nonacademic secondary sources are news articles written after the laundries shut down and they are basically uncovering survivors and piecing together a narrative for the laundries and the institutions that ran besides them.

Historians who studied the Magdalen Laundries typically deal with the accountability that falls upon Catholic Church and Irish government. Popular arguments state that a church-state coalition in both Northern and Southern Ireland during the twentieth century determined women's roles, more specifically, women's sexuality, and equated that to the virtue of the nation and created a national moral identity. The Church has a clear heavy impact on the Irish Government which influenced their laws and beliefs, specifically gender norms. Patriarchal gender norms have been around since ancient times and have persisted in Ireland throughout the operation of the laundries. Through a feminist and reproductive justice lens, historians like Kylie Jarrett in her paper "Through the Reproductive Lens: Labour and Struggle at the Intersection of Culture and Economy," argue that the laundries served as a social and cultural tool supporting the state economic agenda to get men back to work in the weak economy by controlling women's labor.<sup>28</sup> The laundries created a gendered division of labor, promoting domesticity and the "role of women." Additionally, some historians use Ireland's history with the Magdalen Laundries to make arguments about slavery and labor.

One of the first questions raised by historians deals with why it took so long for the Irish

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<sup>28</sup> Jarrett, Kylie. "Through the Reproductive Lens: Labour and Struggle at the Intersection of Culture and Economy." In *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, edited by Chandler David and Fuchs Christian, 103-16. London: University of Westminster Press, 2019. Accessed September 13, 2020. 105.

government to recognize its own human rights violations. In his book *“Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment,”* James Smith argues that although the church carried out the atrocities that occurred in the Magdalen Laundries, the Irish government had direct involvement with the human rights violations.<sup>29</sup> Smith’s book discusses the denial from the Irish government as well as the legislation that essentially protected the laundries and the need for response from the government. Smith’s book is not a historical account of what happened in the laundries, the book tackles bigger questions about involvement and accountability:

The writing of this book has demanded a constant struggle to redirect the energies of moral indignation—personal as well as collective—away from the easy targets in the past and the easy scapegoats in the present and to identify a broader obligation to respond.”<sup>30</sup>

This argument is extremely important because although the nuns mainly took part in the abuse, the Irish government and society as a whole should still take accountability for their completeness.

The Magdalen Laundries also inherently leaves room for historians to make arguments focusing on women’s reproductive rights and feminism. Aida Rosende Perez discusses the debate around women’s bodies and how this debate had a late development in Ireland, a nation knows to control, repress, and misrepresent women and their bodies, in her paper *“Of Bodies and Her-Stories.”*<sup>31</sup> Rosende Perez argues that in Ireland, pregnancy outside of marriage persisted as

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, James M. *Magdalen Laundries: and The Nation's Architecture of Containment*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Rosende Perez, Aida. *"Of Bodies and Her-Stories: Cindy Cummings, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Amelia Stein's "Triúr Ban"."* *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 73-82. Accessed September 12, 2020. 73.

a “symbol of sexual transgression that placed women in a situation of absolute social marginalization and exclusion.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Jennifer Cote argues in her paper “Habits of Vice.’ The House of the Good Shepherd and Competing Narratives of Female Delinquency in Early Twentieth Century Hartford,” that Catholic nuns are usually excluded from feminist narratives despite their power in terms of promoting female reform over delinquency.<sup>33</sup> Cote acknowledges that the conversation around the nuns’ contribution to feminism gets complicated when their abusive and brutal nature in the Magdalen Laundries is discussed.<sup>34</sup> Cote takes an interesting angle by making the nuns the subject of a feminist argument by claiming that nuns enforced female reform while upholding Ireland’s patriarchal standards, rather than contributing to the female delinquency committed by the “fallen women.”

While scholars have raised several other concerns, the final one I want to describe here has to do with labor and where the Magdalen Laundries fit into contemporary examples of slavery. Historian David Keane addresses Ireland’s history of slavery in his paper “Abolitionist in the Heart but Not in Action: Slavery, Servitude and The Status of Article 4 ECHR in Irish Law.” Keane argues that although there is a debate regarding the importance of slavery in Ireland’s history, it is apparent that Ireland had and benefitted from a slave economy and yet slavery has received little attention in Irish history or literature. Keane uses the laundries as a contemporary example of Ireland implementing oppressive institutions to reap the benefits from

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>33</sup> Cote, Jennifer. ""Habits of Vice:" The House of the Good Shepherd and Competing Narratives of Female Delinquency in Early Twentieth Century Hartford." *American Catholic Studies* 122, no. 4 (2011): 23-45. Accessed September 13, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 26.

cumhal (female slave) labor.<sup>35</sup> Keane's argument is important to note in regards to Ireland's extent of accountability for the laundries. Keane states that since the closing of the laundries, the United Nations Committee against torture has acknowledged the abuse and hard labor that took place from 1922 to 1996 inside the laundries, however, the word "slavery" is never brought up.<sup>36</sup> Peter Murray in "A Militant Among The Magdalens? Mary Ellen Murphy's Incarceration in High Park Convent During The 1913 Lockout," gives historiographical context to the Magdalen Asylums, as well as other Irish labour institutions. Murray's paper is important for the slavery and labor aspect of the laundries because he provides background to how Christianity and the media played a role in the operation of the laundries.

The history surrounding the Magdalen Laundries present greater questions not widely explored by historians. One theme that has not been discussed by the historians who have researched the laundries, has to do with the gap between intention and application. The laundries started off with the intention of rehabilitation for women who would have been outcasted by society to turn their lives around under the supervision of the nuns. In practice, the laundries quickly took a dark turn, with the nuns abusing and enslaving the women confined in the asylums. The next greater theme at hand tackles the effectiveness in how laws can help protected those who are marginalized by society. Since the closure of the last laundry in Ireland, it has been revealed that because the Irish government did not require the laundries to follow certain national laws and protocols. The laundries did not need to meet national health

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<sup>35</sup> Keane, David. "ABOLITIONIST IN HEART BUT NOT IN ACTION: SLAVERY, SERVITUDE AND THE STATUS OF ARTICLE 4 ECHR IN IRISH LAW." *Irish Jurist* (1966-), New Series, 50 (2013): 166-98. Accessed September 13, 2020. 166.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

requirements, the laundries also not required to document deaths.<sup>37</sup> This paper will not deal with these questions; however, they should be acknowledged when researching the Magdalen Laundries.

### **Implications of the Laundries**

During the institutionalization of the Magdalen Laundries, Ireland's patriarchal views valued the ideas of domesticity and the stereotypical role of women over the actual women themselves. This is clear simply in the hard-domestic labor the women were forced to do and the way the laundries abused the women for the sake of "rehabilitation." The women enslaved at the laundries did laundry and sewing for the Irish public. Laundry and sewing are typical examples of domestic tasks that patriarchal societies expect women to do. A 1955 advertisement for St. Mary Magdalen's Laundry Donnybrook in Dublin, published in a newspaper reads "collections and deliveries daily in city and suburbs. Every care and individual attention to given to work entrusted to this laundry. No chemicals used."<sup>38</sup> Nancy Shannon, a survivor of the Donnybrook laundry, said everyday inside she would wake up at 5 a.m., wash herself, go to mass, and then spend the rest of her day working and doing laundry.<sup>39</sup> The fact that the laundries were open daily for the public to take advantage of these women's labor, shows that because these women strayed away from Ireland's expectations of women, they needed to make up for their actions

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<sup>37</sup> "State Involvement in the Magdalene Laundries." Justice for Magdalenes, February 16, 2013. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/State\\_Involvement\\_in\\_the\\_Magdalene\\_Laundries\\_public.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/State_Involvement_in_the_Magdalene_Laundries_public.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> "1955 Magdalene Laundry Advertisement." Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive, 1955. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/203/1/Bundle10Tab291.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Nancy Shannon." Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30\\_Nancy-Shannon.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30_Nancy-Shannon.pdf). 11.

through being overworked doing domestic tasks.

Additionally, the women who had children outside of wedlock were separated from their children. Images from the laundries depict that the mothers were not allowed to see their children during their sentences. A picture of the mother's dormitories shows twin sized beds all in a line, with no room for cribs for the babies to sleep in, showing that they could not care for their babies at night after they worked.<sup>40</sup>



Unmarried pregnant mothers would go to a mother baby home, also ran under the Magdalen regime, to have the nuns and young women without children look after them.<sup>41</sup> Once the mother

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<sup>40</sup> “Moms Dorm inside. Jpg (2272×1704).” Accessed April 5, 2019.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/irishmotherbabyhomes/3786078528>

<sup>41</sup> “The Lost Children of Tuam - The New York Times.” Accessed April 30, 2019.

had her child she would be sent away and her baby would stay to be looked after by the nuns, they were usually never reunited. A picture of children inside a play room shows about sixteen young children being cared for by four young girls.<sup>42</sup>



It is important to note that it's unclear whether the pictures taken from inside the laundries had been staged. Research on the laundries shows that the environment the children were cared for under appeared cold and not nurturing since they were separated from their mothers. The next

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/28/world/europe/tuam-ireland-babies-children.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "Children in Playroom 2 Aids.Jpg (2272×1704)." Accessed April 5, 2019.

[https://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/06/02/article-2645870-1E682ADA00000578-839\\_634x476.jpg](https://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/06/02/article-2645870-1E682ADA00000578-839_634x476.jpg)

image shows a children's tearoom under the supervision of a nun.<sup>43</sup>



In the picture, the children are looking at the camera with calm expressions and a nun is standing in the corner of the room, not interacting with the children. Once again, we do not know whether this photo was staged and why it was taken, this makes it difficult to accurately interpret these images. Nancy Shannon, at 20 years old, reports being separated from her family, not allowed to see her mother or her two sons, even when one of her sons was in the hospital. *The New York Times* interviewed a woman named Catherine Corless. Corless did not grow up in the institution but she said that she remembered going to school with the children at the institution vaguely and that they were segregated, not being allowed to play with the other children.<sup>44</sup> The mothers were

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<sup>43</sup> "Children in Tea Room.Jpg (2272×1704)." Accessed April 5, 2019.

<https://cdn.lifedaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/19-st-josephs-orphanage-story.jpg>

<sup>44</sup> "The Lost Children of Tuam - The New York Times." Accessed April 30, 2019.

not only separated from their children, but the children were also separated from their peers.

Another example of the women being separated from their families is displayed in a 1956 letter from the Carlow County Council.<sup>45</sup> The letter is about a woman who had been placed in the laundries multiple times for having two children outside of her marriage with her husband. The letter states that the day she was first admitted to the institution, she gave birth and that she also gave birth the second time she was in the convent. The letter never says what happened to her two illegitimate children, implying that they were separated from her. However, the letter does say that her eight-year-old child that she had with her husband lived in the convent with her and that they wanted to separate them. The mother refused to be separated from her child, so the county officials wrote the letter looking for an institution to house the mother and child. It is unclear if they found housing for the mother and child together. It is clear that because of these women's "impure" lifestyles they deserved to be isolated from their loved ones and do domestic labor, in order for them to be rehabilitated.

It is also very apparent that once a woman was sentenced to work in the convent, it was very difficult for her to leave, even if family members wanted her out as well. Shannon was brought to the laundries by her aunt for having two sons without a husband. Shannon's aunt lied to her brothers and told them she was not taking Shannon to the convent. Shannon ended up staying in the laundries for seven years without seeing her family or sons unsupervised and when her mother wanted to get her out, she could not because Shannon's aunt had died. Eventually, a

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/28/world/europe/tuam-ireland-babies-children.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Carlow County Council." Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/161/1/Bundle5Tab127.pdf>

priest let her out of the convent. A document from 1941 called "Memorandum for Mr. Carrigg" from the Green Street Courthouse in Dublin, discusses the daughter of a man who committed a crime was sentenced to live in a convent pending his trial.<sup>46</sup> The letter stated that the daughter's sentence in the convent was ending the next day and that they wanted to resentence her to another institution before her sentenced ended so she could immediately be transferred. The girl

GREEN STREET COURTHOUSE,  
Dublin.

23

Memorandum for Mr. Carrigg/

PEOPLE V [REDACTED]

The above man's daughter was sent to High Park Convent by Judge Davitt for seven days expiring tomorrow, Wednesday, and Miss Carroll, the Probation Officer was to report as to the possibilities of securing another place for this girl pending the trial of her father. Miss Carroll has now gone to London on urgent, personal business and will be unable to appear, but she has reported to me that she has not been able to secure any other refuge for this girl and states that the High Park Nuns are willing to keep the girl until the end of November of this year and, in the circumstances, she recommends that the necessary order be made by the Judge for this purpose.

Will you please take the matter up with the Judge tomorrow?

8th July, 1941.

*Probation Officer*

*High Park, Dr. [unclear]*

*[Signature]*

herself did not commit a crime or do anything that would warrant her to work at the laundries, instead she was being punished because of her father's actions. The unnamed girl, in a similar

<sup>46</sup> "Memorandum for Mr. Carrigg: Green Street Courthouse, Dublin." Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/129/1/Bundle5Tab137.pdf>

fashion to Shannon, had a difficult time leaving the laundry once she was already sentenced.

The fact that these women had difficulties leaving the laundries, shows that they were not valued as much as their labor was.

Next, the women held captive in the laundries were abused while the church covered-up the abuse. In some cases, women went missing after they were admitted to the laundries and the church covered those deaths up as well. Survivors of the laundries report having their names and birthdays changed.<sup>47</sup> Francis Walsh, who went to an orphanage and then worked in a laundry, said while she was at the school, they called her “fourteen” and she was not allowed to answer to her real name. Once she got to the laundry, she got her full name back and she rebelled because of this change:

And then when they started calling me Frances, I didn't know who the hell...who the...I couldn't even answer them. I said, 'no, my name is Fourteen,' and they just looked at me. I said, 'that's me name, Fourteen,' and the nuns just said to me, 'Fourteen?' I said, 'yeah that's me name!'<sup>48</sup>

The women faced the mental abuse of being stripped of their identities and families, but they also faced extreme physical abuse. Nancy Shannon described being hit with keys, locked in a cellar, and given only tea and bread for two days because she wanted to tell the son of a woman in the laundry that his mother had died.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hundreds gather in Dublin for Magdalene laundry survivors. (n.d.). Retrieved November 13, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-44378035>.

<sup>48</sup> “Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Francis Walsh.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MAGOHP20\\_ANON\\_Frances-Walsh.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MAGOHP20_ANON_Frances-Walsh.pdf). 18

<sup>49</sup> “Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Nancy Shannon.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30\\_Nancy-Shannon.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30_Nancy-Shannon.pdf). 13.

They hit me with the keys. They locked me in... it's like a cellar, they locked me in and gave me tea and dried bread for two days...Because I wouldn't tell the truth about this woman that died, that was buried in the convent ground, and I wanted to tell the truth but they wouldn't listen, and it played on my mind ever since.<sup>50</sup>

Shannon also said the women were not allowed to talk when they were working. The women were only allowed to speak when they got little breaks. Mary Cavner, who was 11 years old when she was admitted to a laundry in Cork to look after the illegitimate babies that had been separated from their mothers.<sup>51</sup> Cavner also said that she was not allowed to talk at her laundry either, which kept them from making friends. Cavner was in shock when she left the laundries because she was essentially isolated for all the years she spent inside the workhouse. Francis Walsh also said she lost her teeth at a young age because she did not have a toothbrush or toothpaste at the laundry she worked at and was never given one by the laundry staff.<sup>52</sup> Walsh never even knew what a store was during her childhood and young adult years because she was immediately transferred from the orphanage to the laundry.<sup>53</sup> However, Walsh said that she never saw anyone beaten in the laundry she worked at and that the nuns were “lovely.”<sup>54</sup> Instead, Walsh did describe abuse taking place within her orphanage and even said she hit a nun in retaliation:

I was about fourteen...say around...nearly fifteen and I went down to the Recreation Room to do something and there was a little girl...and she was only about five, between five and six, and this nun was... beating the hell out of her. And there were a few of the girls with me and they stood there and I said, she won't do it again I'm going over; I don't care. And the girls or the numbers

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>51</sup> “Survivor Breaks Silence on Workhouse Life.” BBC News. Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-hampshire-46921279/magdalene-laundries-survivor-we-weren-t-allowed-to-talk>.

<sup>52</sup> “Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Francis Walsh.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MAGOHP20\\_ANON\\_Frances-Walsh.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/MAGOHP20_ANON_Frances-Walsh.pdf). 28

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 45.

like thirty-two or sixteen, we never knew our own. And they said, ‘don’t...Fourteen, don’t,’ and I said, ‘I don’t care, I’m going over’. So, I tipped her and I said, ‘if you hit her once more again, I’ll hit you’. And she went to hit me, ... I got the stick and I walloped her across the face twice. ‘Now,’ I said, ‘how do you feel?’ And she sat down crying and all and she’d...now of course the nuns all ran to help her. I got beaten up after but I didn’t care.<sup>55</sup>

This shows that each laundry was ran differently and that there likely was not any common policy for treatment within the laundry. However, abuse in many forms, was common within all of the institutions

Overall, the fact that these women faced abuse, both mental and physical, and that the church covered up the deaths of these women, not telling their families, shows that these women were not valued. It was essentially acceptable for the Catholic Church to abuse these women because they needed to “rehabilitate” themselves. Since the domestic labor these women were performing was more important than the women themselves, they served long sentences, were isolated from their families, were beaten, and were silenced.

The Catholic Church and the Irish Government were the major two entities at fault for the horrors that occurred under the Magdalen Regime, including all of the institutions from the orphanages, reformatory schools, and the laundries. Firstly, the Catholic Church was a very powerful entity in Ireland, especially when that laundries operated. The partnership that the church had with the Irish government prompted many laws that contributed to the outlasting of those who strayed against moral ideals and censorship. Some of these laws include the 1926 Inquiry Regarding Venereal Disease, the 1927 Committee on Evil Literature, and the 1928 Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor Including the Insane Poor, 1930 the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 5

Illegitimate Children (Affiliation Orders) Act, and the 1931 Legitimacy Act.<sup>56</sup> The Irish government clearly had a large impact in enforcing a conservative and patriarchal standard on Irish society, which helped the laundries run the way they did.

Secondly, the Irish Government is in fact to blame, just as much as the church, because of their level of involvement in the institutions. The government was involved in the Magdalen system in a plethora of ways. The government did not require the institutions to adhere to health and safety codes nor were they required to keep a record of the deaths that occurred on the convent grounds.<sup>57</sup> The government is also accountable for the transfers that occurred between the institutions, such as the transfer from orphanages or mother-baby homes to laundry the laundries.<sup>58</sup> Irish police also in some case returned women who left the laundries back and finally, the government did not require the children in the orphanages and reformatory schools received education.<sup>59</sup> The government's involvement is extremely important to note because if they required the laundries to adhere to legal codes, much of the abuse would be less likely to occur.

Despite the government's extensive involvement, the harsh reality is that the Irish public is complicit as well. The public accepted the system that enslaved these girls and women by sending them there and benefitting from their labor. The patriarchal and elitist views Irish

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<sup>56</sup> Smith, James M. "The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report (1931)." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (2004): 208-33. Accessed September 15, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704856>. 21.

<sup>57</sup> "State Involvement in the Magdalene Laundries." *Justice for Magdalenes*, February 16, 2013. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/State\\_Involvement\\_in\\_the\\_Magdalene\\_Laundries\\_public.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/State_Involvement_in_the_Magdalene_Laundries_public.pdf). 102, 140.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 82, 321.

society as a whole, led by a need to repress female sexuality drove the sentencing of women and girls who were poor, committed crimes, or were unmarried with children to go work in the laundries.

The girls and women were sent to the laundries essentially because they were lower class individuals who were orphans, the children of criminals or have even committed a crime themselves, had diseases such as alcoholism, were prostitutes, and had children outside of marriage, even if that pregnancy was a product of rape. Smith classifies the women and girls sentenced to laundries into two categories: the fallen women and the “preventative” who were young women in moral danger of becoming fallen women.<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Coppin, a survivor of the laundries, fits into the “preventative” category. Coppin was being abused by her step-father, which got her sent to an orphanage. Once she was 14 years old, she got transferred from the orphanage and was sentenced to work at a Magdalen Laundry.<sup>61</sup> A document called “The People V. Bridget” from 1939, states that because this woman named Bridget pleaded guilty to manslaughter, she would need to be sentenced to two years inside the laundry.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, James M. *Magdalen Laundries: and The Nation's Architecture of Containment*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 15

<sup>61</sup> “Magdalene Laundry Survivor ‘They Were the Sinners.’” BBC News. Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-29318610>

<sup>62</sup> “The People V. Bridget.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. <http://repository.wit.ie/JFMA/id/eprint/128/1/Bundle5Tab135.pdf>.

9th January 39.

The People v. Bridget [redacted].

A Charge,

I have to inform you that the above named Bridget [redacted] pleaded guilty to Manslaughter at the Central Criminal Court, Dublin, on 30th November 1938. On 8th December, 1938, <sup>and</sup> it was ordered that:-

"She enter into her own recognizance in £10 conditioned (1) that she will keep the peace towards all the citizens of Eire for three years from this date and that she will come up for sentence of the Court at any time within three years if called upon to do so. (2) That she will immediately place herself under the care of the Sisters of Charity at the Convent, Henrietta St. Dublin, and enter and remain in said Convent for the period of two years from this date and during such period she will adhere to and obey the rules and regulations of the said Institution.

She left in charge of the Probation Office, whom, I presume, took her to the Convent.

Mise, le meae,

*[Signature]*  
Clara their Ghondae.

Major J.C.E. Fitzgerald,  
Solicitor,  
Mill St.  
MoRagham

Although the Irish public was likely not entirely aware of the kinds of abuse that was going on inside the laundries, they were still complicit, especially after the institutions were well established in Ireland. Overall, as the laundries ran, Smith states that their original purpose of rehabilitation was lost:

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the Irish institutions were functioning less and less as rehabilitative short-term refuges. Fewer women entered these asylums voluntarily, as they did in the nineteenth century, and women were detained for longer

periods, many for life.<sup>63</sup>

This proves that the longer the laundries were around, up until the 1990s, the more complicit society was. Since the women stopped coming to the laundries voluntarily shows that the people who were admitting these women were family members and local courts. The members of Irish society clearly knew that the laundries were bad in some type of way. Nancy Shannon's aunt, who admitted Nancy to the laundries, lied to Nancy's brothers, telling them that she was not taking Nancy to the convent.<sup>64</sup> This clearly shows that the public had some knowledge about the true nature of the laundries, which makes society complicit.

Additionally, the laundries ran for an additional three years after the mass grave was found on convent property in 1993. So, the public should have been fully aware that there was a system of abuse and cover-ups going on inside the laundries, yet they were still able to operate for three more years. A 1994 poem written by American poet R.T Smith highlights the horrors of the Magdalen Asylums:

With stories and the weeping  
 that seeped into granite.  
 When "wayward girls"  
 cast off by kin  
 worked for the Sisters  
 of Mercy, escape was  
 unlikely. Moth-cautious  
 and lonely, they labored  
 with a stone of soap  
 to cleanse every soiled  
 vestment or smock. Palms  
 scalded, skin white as leeks  
 and eyebrows bleached

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>64</sup> "Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Nancy Shannon." Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30\\_Nancy-Shannon.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30_Nancy-Shannon.pdf). 2.

threadbare, each girl tore her  
 knuckles on a washboard,  
 kept her songs secret  
 and feared the pearl  
 virgins with their holy  
 uniforms and keys.

The excerpt of the poem provides evidence that the news of the abuse that occurred inside the Magdalen Laundries was public knowledge even globally since this American poet wrote about them in detail. The poem talks about how these “wayward girls” were sent to the laundries by their family members and how they labored while it was unlikely for them to escape. It’s interesting to point out that someone who was not even in one of Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries, or even in the country for that matter, could encapsulate the loneliness and suffering these women went through.

It is important to note that a lot of the women who worked in the laundries suffered in silence during and afterwards. Nancy Shannon said that when her family was able to visit her, she was supervised by the nuns and was not allowed to talk about the abuse she suffered.<sup>65</sup>

Johanna Barrett’s great aunt was one of the women who worked in the laundries and she did not know she had a family connection until her sick mother told her.<sup>66</sup> Barrett and her family did not know many details about the abuse her great aunt suffered, other than the fact that her great aunt died in the laundry:

She might have married; my father might have cousins. And all of that just disappeared

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<sup>65</sup> “Interview with Magdalene Laundry Survivor Nancy Shannon.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30\\_Nancy-Shannon.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MAGOHP30_Nancy-Shannon.pdf). 15.

<sup>66</sup> “Interview with Magdalene Laundry Relative Johanna Barrett.” Justice for Magdalenes Research Archive. Accessed September 12, 2020. [http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MAGOHP77\\_Johanna-Barrett\\_ANON.pdf](http://jfmresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MAGOHP77_Johanna-Barrett_ANON.pdf) 3.

into thin air. And I think that's a pity. I think that's a loss. And I think that when we...that could be one of the ways to explain to people the harm that the Magdalenes did, that it deprived us in a way that we can't even articulate of family and community life, and of...you know, of women who – maybe some of them if they were particularly disobedient – you know, would have made valuable contributions to their community in that way, by not taking the church too seriously.<sup>67</sup>

However, the scandal and public outcry did play a role in the Gloucester Street Laundry's closure in 1996, the last laundry to exist in Ireland. The laundry housed 40 people at the time, most of whom were elderly or suffered from intellectual developmental disabilities.<sup>68</sup>

After the laundries finally closed in 1996, it took a long time for the survivors to receive an apology from the government, however, it appears that the knowledge of their suffering led for them to be more valued and visible in society. This is apparent in the extensive media coverage these women have received and the acknowledgement that the government has issued eighteen years after the laundries closed. Now, there is an entire organization and archive dedicated to getting justice for the survivors of the laundries. The women only gained a voice in society after the crimes committed by the church and government came to light.

The Irish government did not issue the survivors of the laundries an official apology for their involvement until 2013.<sup>69</sup> Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny addressed the survivors:

For 90 years Ireland subjected these women, and their experience, to a profound indifference. By any standards it was a cruel and pitiless Ireland, distinctly lacking in mercy. We swapped our public scruples for a solid public apparatus.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>68</sup> Blakemore, E. (2018, March 12). How Ireland Turned 'Fallen Women' Into Slaves. Retrieved November 13, 2020, from <https://www.history.com/news/magdalene-laundry-ireland-asylum-abuse>

<sup>69</sup> Magdalene laundries: Irish Prime Minister issues apology. (2013, February 13). BBC.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

The Irish government also requested that Law Reform Commission's president, Judge John Quirke, carry out a three-month review to figure out the best way to provide support and payment for the Magdalen survivors. It is safe to argue though that without the exposure of the mass grave in 1993, the laundry survivors would have still been silenced and they would not be valued in society. Meaning the scandal was a necessary factor for these women to receive some form of justice, however, the women will never get true justice until the church acknowledges the human rights violation they committed and release their records of the laundry to the public.

In addition to governmental recognition, the women received massive news coverage after the scandal, allowing those who were still alive to share their stories. The news coverage also ignored the angle that these women strayed from Ireland's moral ideals. *The BBC* conducted interviews with these women as they attended the government event where they received a formal apology, and also in some cases where they revisited the sites where they were abused to talk about their experiences in the laundries, why they were sent there and how it has impacted them since. The BBC video interviews humanized these women and depicted them as survivors of abuse rather than shamed individuals.

*The New York Times* also filmed a short documentary discussing the illegitimate children who were put up for adoption. The documentary is called "The Lost Children of Tuam" and it follows the children who have grown up inside the institutions. In the documentary it says that the "locals" put up a memorial in memory of the children who died on convent grounds when an additional mass grave was found with the remains of infants. The grave was found when was visiting an apple orchard on the convent grounds and he found bones. The site at Tuam was specifically one of Ireland's mother baby homes. One of the interview subjects said he felt like

an animal inside the institution and would have dreams that he was growing horns.<sup>71</sup> The fact that these survivors are given a voice through interviews where you can see them and hear their voices is complete juxtaposition compared to what they experienced before the scandal came to light, when they suffered in silence.

Additionally, the Justice for Magdalenes group was founded in 2003 to push for the Irish government to issue an apology and to set up a system of compensation for the survivors. The website states:

JFM exited the political arena in May 2013 having achieved its aims of a State Apology and the establishment of a commission led by Mr. Justice Quirke to establish a State Redress Scheme. At this point Justice for Magdalenes Research (JFMR) was established. The members of JFMR have been assisting survivors in a personal capacity since before May 2013 and continue to do this work.<sup>72</sup>

Since the organization has met its goal, the Justice for Magdalenes still compiles primary sources and other documents to educate people on the human rights violation that the church and Irish government committed. The organization also started an oral project where they interview survivors, relatives of the survivors, activists, and key informants. The organization has interviewed twenty-seven survivors, one relative, eight key informants, and two activists. These interviews allow the those involved to share their stories and spread awareness about the Magdalen Laundries and the types of abuse that occurred there.

Piecing together a complete and accurate narrative of the Magdalen regime in Ireland is a

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<sup>71</sup> “The Lost Children of Tuam - The New York Times.” Accessed April 30, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/28/world/europe/tuam-ireland-babies-children.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Justice for Magdalenes About. (n.d.). Retrieved November 13, 2020, from <http://jfmresearch.com/aboutjfmr/>

difficult task. Many of the survivors who were able to tell their stories had different experiences and many institutions operated within the Magdalen system. However, there is enough overlap within these experiences to make generalizations about this massive human and reproductive rights violation. Although not all of the women witnessed abuse or was abused in the laundries, mental and physical abuse was a common feature of the laundries and the institutions that operated within the regime. The abuse paired with the unpaid labor shows that the women and girls sentenced to work within the laundries and housed in these other institutions were not valued as much as the labor they were performing. This is proved because they were separated from families, were not allowed to talk, were sometimes not supplied with basic hygiene tools such as a tooth brush, and were deprived of their names and true ages.

Overall, accountability should fall on the church and government for their direct participation in this contemporary example of slavery, however, it also should fall on the Irish public who were alive during the operation of the laundries. To take accountability, Irish society should evaluate their norms and how they allowed for this centuries-long human rights violation to take place. In many cases, the women were not brought to the laundries voluntarily and instead were brought there by their family members. The Irish public during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did uphold the shame surrounding women having children out of wedlock or just straying from the moral ideals Ireland had. This was a major reason for the laundries to operate. Lastly the labor of these outcasted women was used by the public. So, even if all of information regarding the slave labor and abuse was not made public, the Irish people still participated to some extent.

The women afterwards, if they did not die inside the institutions, suffered in silence, not

telling their stories until the media and public wanted answers after the mass graves were discovered. For these women to receive recognition as survivors instead of sinners, the national scandal was necessary for the women to receive some form of justice.

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