



# JUSTICE FOR MAGDALENES RESEARCH

Justice for Magdalenes Research  
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27<sup>th</sup> August 2020

FAO: Ms Maura Butler

Sent via email to: [s7areview@justice.ie](mailto:s7areview@justice.ie)

**Re: Review Of The Operation Of Part 4 Of The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017**

Dear Ms Butler,

Justice for Magdalenes Research (JFMR) is a voluntary organisation whose main aim is to provide for the advancement of the education of the general public, by researching Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and similar institutions, and by providing information and support to the women who spent time in the Magdalene Laundries and their families.

JFMR is writing to ask you to consider Ireland's history of discrimination against women in your review of the operation of Part 4 of the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017*.

Well over 10,000 girls and women are known to have spent time in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries between the foundation of the State and 1996, when the last institution closed in Dublin. Survivor testimony is unanimous that girls and women in Magdalene Laundries were imprisoned, forced into unpaid labour, physically and emotionally abused, neglected and humiliated, and denied human dignity in other ways. Today, numerous women who died in Magdalene Laundries still lie unidentified in communal graves and in unmarked graves. Women who survived the Magdalene Laundries continue to suffer their effects, including trauma, ill-health, poverty, a profound sense of stigmatisation (albeit the State apology was intended to ameliorate this) and social isolation.

Ireland's Magdalene Laundries formed part of a network of institutions which allowed the Irish State, the Catholic Church and Irish society to lock away girls and women seen to pose a threat to the nation's supposed image as a chaste, morally 'pure' nation. Rather than acknowledge and implement proper measures to address sexual violence against children and women, inadequate knowledge of human sexuality, women's lack of control over their fertility, and the need for social supports to enable women to care for their

children outside of marriage, the Magdalene Laundries were part of an effort to hide these realities and the girls and women who evidenced them.

Magdalene Laundries stripped thousands of girls and women of all of their basic rights as citizens. Yet, at the time, religious morality operated as a blindfold, and even as justification for these rights violations.

The voices of women who spent time in Magdalene Laundries have finally been listened to over the past decade. Their experiences are all that was necessary to hear, in order to understand how the Magdalene system—although justified by some as well-meaning—was gravely abusive.

Today, two of the religious that operated Magdalene Laundries—namely, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and the Good Shepherd Sisters (now amalgamated as the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd)—play a leading role in setting the narrative on sex work in Ireland. It is our fervent belief that these orders have not yet learned from their abusive practices. Not one of the four Magdalene orders has apologised for the human rights abuses committed in their institutions, nor have they contributed to the *ex gratia* scheme. Yet, the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd is funded by the State to provide services to, and speak for, other populations of marginalised women.

Meanwhile, sex workers who do not conform to an expected narrative struggle to have their voices heard.

We urge you in your review to allow sex workers to be the authorities on their own experiences.

Yours sincerely,

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Assoc Prof Katherine O'Donnell and Claire McGettrick  
On behalf of JFM Research