

Case Number: 324153

“If you wished to know how civilized a culture is, look at how they treat it's women”. This quote – often attributed to Ghandi was by Bacha Khan. Ghandi reportedly referred to “vulnerable citizens” and “animals”, in speeches as to how civilised societies should be judged on fair treatment. In his book, ‘Long Walk to Freedom’ Nelson Mandela stated “A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones”. I ask An Coimisiún Pleanála to reflect on how Ireland will be judged if building is allowed on grounds containing the remains of those who were (all but in name) incarcerated in Bessborough House. Do those human beings not DESERVE to be treated with dignity and be afforded the same rights as anyone who dies in Ireland today?

I further ask An Coimisiún Pleanála to read the following speech by An Tasoiseach Enda Kenny in February of 2013.

[Enda Kenny: 'We put away these women because .for too many years we put away our conscience', .Apology to Magdalene Laundries women - 2013](#)

19 February 2013, Dublin, Ireland

I begin today's debate by thanking Dr Martin McAleese and his team for their excellent work on this report.

I thank equally all the women who met with them to assist in its compilation. I also thank the religious orders who cooperated fully with Dr. McAleese.

Together they have helped provide Ireland with a document of truth.

The Magdalene laundries have cast a long shadow over Irish life over our sense of who we are.

It's just two weeks since we received this report: the first-ever detailed Report into the State's involvement in the Magdalene Laundries.

It shines a bright and necessary light on a dark chapter of Ireland's history.

On coming to office the Government was determined to investigate the facts of the State's involvement.

The government was adamant that these ageing and elderly women would get the compassion and the recognition for which they have fought for so long deserved so deeply and had, until now, been so abjectly denied.

The reality is that for 90 years Ireland subjected these women and their experience to a profound and studied indifference.

I was determined because of this that this Government – this Dáil – would take the necessary time not just to commission the Report but to actually study it and having done so to reflect on its findings.

I believe that was the best way to formulate a plan and strategy that would help us make amends for

the State's role in the hurt of these extraordinary women.

I'm glad that so many of the women themselves agreed with that approach.

And I'm glad that this time of reflection gave me the chance to do the most important thing of all: to meet personally with the Magdalene Women. To sit down with them, face to face, to listen to their stories.

It was a humbling and inspiring experience.

Today, as their Taoiseach, I am privileged to welcome some of these women to this House many of whom have travelled long distances to be here.

I warmly welcome you every one of you to your national parliament, to Dail Eireann.

What we discuss today is your story. What we address today is how you took this country's terrible 'secret' and made it your own. Burying it carrying it in your hearts here at home, or with you to England and to Canada America and Australia on behalf of Ireland and the Irish people.

But from this moment on you need carry it no more. Because today we take it back. Today we acknowledge the role of the State in your ordeal.

We now know that the State itself was directly involved in over a quarter of all admissions to the Magdalene Laundries.

Be it through the social services reformatories psychiatric institutions county homes the prison and probation service and industrial schools.

In fact we have decided to include all the Magdalene women in our response regardless of how they were admitted.

Dr McAleese set out to investigate five areas in particular;

- 1: The routes by which the women entered the laundries*
- 2: Regulations of the workplace and State inspections*
- 3: State funding of and financial assistance to the laundries*
- 4: The routes by which the girls and women left the laundries*
- 5: Death registrations, burials and exhumations*

In all five areas there was found to be direct State involvement.

As I read this Report and as I listened to these women, it struck me that for generations Ireland had created a particular portrait of itself as a good living God-fearing nation.

Through this and other reports we know this flattering self-portrait to be fictitious.

It would be easy to explain away all that happened – all we did in those great moral and social salves of 'the culture back then' = the 'order of the day', 'the terrible times that were in it'.

Yes, by any standards it was a cruel, pitiless Ireland distinctly lacking in a quality of mercy. That much is clear, both from the ages of the Report, and from the stories of the women I met.

As I sat with these women as they told their stories it was clear that while every woman's story was different each of them shared a particular experience of a particular Ireland judgemental intolerant petty and prim.

In the laundries themselves some women spent weeks others months more of them years. But the thread that ran through their many stories was a palpable sense of suffocation not just physical in that they were incarcerated but psychological .spiritual social. Their stories were enriched by an astonishing vividness of recall of situation and circumstance.

Here are some of the things I read in the report and they said directly to me:

"The work was so hard, the regime was cruel."

"I felt all alone, nobody wanted me."

"They sent me because they thought I was going to a good school."

"I seen these older people beside me, I used cry myself to sleep."

"I was bold, I wasn't going to school."

"I was locked up I thought I would never get out."

"We had to sew at night even when we were sick."

"I heard a radio sometimes in the distance."

"We were not allowed to talk to each other."

"Your letters were checked."

"I was so short I needed a stool to put washing in."

"The noise was desperate."

"I thought I would go mad from the silence."

"The heat was unbelievable."

"I broke a cup once and had to wear it hanging around my neck for three days."

"I felt always tired always wet .always humiliated."

"My father came for me after three months but I was too ashamed to go home."

"I never saw my Mam again she died while I was in there."

The Magdalene Women might have been told that they were washing away a wrong or a sin but we know now and to our shame they were only ever scrubbing away our nation's shadow.

Today, just as the State accepts its direct involvement in the Magdalene Laundries society too has its responsibility.

I believe I speak for millions of Irish people all over the world when I say we put away these women because .for too many years we put away our conscience.

We swapped our personal scruples for a solid public apparatus that kept us in tune and in step with a sense of what was 'proper behaviour' or the 'appropriate view' according to a sort of moral code that was fostered at the time particularly in the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

We lived with the damaging idea that what was desirable and acceptable in the eyes of the Church

and the State was the same and interchangeable.

Is it this mindset then this moral subservience that gave us the social mores the required and exclusive 'values' of the time that welcomed the compliant, obedient and lucky 'us' and banished the more problematic, spirited or unlucky 'them'?

And to our nation's shame it must be said that if these women had managed to scale the high walls of the laundries they'd have had their work cut out for them to negotiate the height and the depth of the barricades around society's 'proper' heart. For we saw difference as something to be feared and hidden rather than embraced and celebrated.

But were these our 'values'?

*Because we can ask ourselves for a State – least of all a republic.
What is the 'value' of the tacit and unchallenged decree that saw society humiliate and degrade these girls and women?*

What is the 'value' of the ignorance and arrogance that saw us publicly call them 'Penitents' for their 'crime' of being poor or abused or just plain unlucky enough to be already the inmate of a reformatory, or an industrial school or a psychiatric institution?

We can ask ourselves as the families we were then what was worthy what was good about that great euphemism of 'putting away' our daughters our sisters our aunties ?

Those 'values' those failures those wrongs characterised Magdalene Ireland.

Today we live in a very different Ireland with a very a different consciousness awareness – an Ireland where we have more compassion empathy insight heart.

We do because at last we are learning those terrible lessons. We do because at last we are giving up our secrets.

We do because in naming and addressing the wrong, as is happening here today, we are trying to make sure we quarantine such abject behaviour in our past and eradicate it from Ireland's present and Ireland's future.

In a society guided by the principles of compassion and social justice there never would have been any need for institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries.

The Report shows that the perception that the Magdalene Laundries were reserved for what were offensively and judgementally called "fallen women" is not based upon fact at all but upon prejudice. The women are and always were wholly blameless.

Therefore, I, as Taoiseach, on behalf of the State, the government and our citizens deeply regret and apologise unreservedly to all those women for the hurt that was done to them, and for any stigma they suffered, as a result of the time they spent in a Magdalene Laundry.

I hope that the publication of the McAleese Report and this apology makes some contribution to the

healing process.

But in reflecting on this Report I have come to the view that these women deserve more than this formal apology, important though it is. I also want to put in place a process by which we can determine how best to help and support the women in their remaining years.

One of the many things I have learned during my recent meetings with these women is that their circumstances and current needs vary greatly from person to person.

That's why the Government has today asked the President of the Law Reform Commission, Judge John Quirke, to undertake a three month review and to make recommendations as to the criteria that should be applied in assessing the help that the government can provide in the areas of payments and other supports, including medical cards, psychological and counselling services and other welfare needs.

The terms of reference for Judge Quirke will be published later today and I will also arrange for the representatives of the women to be fully briefed on this process. When Judge Quirke has reported, the government will establish a Fund to assist the women, based on his recommendations.

I am confident that this process will enable us to provide speedy, fair and meaningful help to the women in a compassionate and non adversarial way. I am determined that the fund will be primarily used to help the women – as is their stated and strong desire – not for legal or administrative costs.

The McAleese Report also refers to women who recounted similar experiences in other residential laundries, such as the laundry offering services to the public operated in the Training Centre at Stanhope Street, Dublin.

The government has decided that these women should be included in both the apology I have extended today, and in the Fund.

I am also conscious that many of the women I met last week want to see a permanent memorial established to remind us all of this dark part of our history.

I agree that this should be done and intend to engage directly with the representative groups and of as many of the women as possible to agree on the creation of an appropriate memorial to be financed by the Government separately from the funds that are being set aside for the direct assistance for the women.

Let me conclude by again speaking directly to the women whose experiences in Magdalene Laundries have negatively affected their subsequent lives.

As a society, for many years we failed you.

We forgot you or, if we thought of you at all, we did so in untrue and offensive stereotypes.

This is a national shame, for which I again say, I am deeply sorry and offer my full and heartfelt apologies.

At the conclusion of my discussions with one group of the Magdalene Women one of those present sang 'Whispering Hope'. A line from that song stays in my mind – "when the dark midnight is over, watch for the breaking of day".

Let me hope that this day and this debate – excuse me – heralds a new dawn for all those who feared that the dark midnight might never end.

I ask An Coimisiún Pleanála, to consider the following words of Catriona Crowe from a recently article in the Irish Times:

Where are the protests over the torture and abuse of 100,000 Irish citizens?

Are we going to 'literally concrete over' the sufferings of children and grieving mothers failed by Church and State?

Catriona Crowe, 17th April 2026

Bessborough. Surely by now we all know what happened there. Between 1922 and 1998, at least 9,768 women and 8,938 children passed through the mother and baby home, located in an 18th century house and outbuildings near Cork city. The congregation that ran this institution and two others in Ireland was the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The women were pregnant outside marriage and gave birth to their children there.

Most of the children were adopted, many against the wishes of their mothers, who had to promise never to contact them in the future. In the past 30 years, their stories have emerged, disclosing a harsh, cruel system that treated both mothers and babies with, at best, indifference and, at worst contempt.

Please don't stop reading. It's just that a lot of people seem to have tired of this subject, and feel it's time to "move on".

There have been three major government reports on industrial schools, Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes. There have been excellent TV and radio documentaries. Many brave survivors have revealed what happened to them: physical, sexual and emotional abuse and cruelty, and serious, sometimes life-threatening neglect.

But we have never seen protests to match the recent ones about fuel prices and earlier ones about water charges about the torture (as defined by a UN rapporteur in the case of Magdalene laundries), enforced family separation, compulsory unpaid labour, beatings, verbal denigration, shaming, stigmatisation and punishment of more than 100,000 of our fellow citizens in these institutions.

Is the price of gas and oil or the prospect of a utility tax more important than the trauma still suffered by so many, which continues to the next generation?

Does Ireland fundamentally want to forget that these things happened? Does the Catholic Church, still holding on to vital records of these institutions, want us to forget? Does the State, which was complicit for all those years in what was happening? Do families prefer to obliterate memories of daughters and sisters cast out because of non-marital pregnancy? Do they all intend to make do with State apologies, threadbare redress schemes for which many do not qualify and a well-intentioned Centre for Research and Remembrance which is taking far too long?

Please don't stop reading.

A few days ago, I spoke to Carmel Cantwell, who is one of the leaders of a campaign to stop 140 apartments being built on the Bessborough site, where it is probable that around 850 children are buried in unmarked graves. Carmel's mother, Madeleine Walsh, had a son in Bessborough in 1960. She was 17 years old. She had been brought back to Ireland from London – where she had fled when she discovered she was pregnant – by the Crusade of Rescue. This was an organisation that repatriated pregnant Irish women with a view to having their babies adopted.

William died six weeks after birth, despite being born healthy and well. Madeleine watched him deteriorate over three weeks in Bessborough, in what was known by the women there as the “dying room”, pleading with the nuns to get a doctor to look at him. Eventually he was brought to the adjacent hospital, where he died three weeks later.

Madeleine returned to England, where she attempted suicide three times, and ended up in a mental hospital, which she credits with saving her life. She eventually married and had Carmel. She never told anyone of her ordeal in Bessborough, consumed by the fear and shame that our society imposed on women in her situation.

In 1994, Carmel, who had married, decided to move to Cork, as fate would have it, close to Bessborough. Her mother came to visit her new home, and one day went to Bessborough without telling anyone. She wanted to find William's grave; she was taken to the outskirts of a burial ground by an impatient nun, who did not allow her to enter the plot or to memorialise William.

As her daughter Carmel tells it, when her mother returned from her secret visit, she collapsed and wept bitterly. She was so distraught that she could not articulate the cause. Eventually, she was able to tell her daughter. Thirty four years after the agony of her child's death, she spoke for the first time to a family member about one of the defining events of her life.

Please don't stop reading.

Don't stop reading while there can be no moving on for Madeleine or Carmel. They are caught in a terrible few weeks more than 60 years ago and have no way of escaping. Nor do they want to. That would be to abandon the memory of William, an unthinkable idea.

Where is William? It is very probable he was buried at Carr's Hill, a local Famine graveyard; but he could be in the tidy plot where Madeleine was taken on that fateful visit; or somewhere else in the 60 acres of land attached to the house where so much suffering took place. No one knows, because there has been no commitment to excavate the site as is being done in Tuam, famously identified by Catherine Corless as containing the bodies of almost 800 babies and children.

*Noelle Brown who, like William, was born in Bessborough in the 1960s, is an indefatigable campaigner for the rights of survivors of these institutions, or “affected people”, as many of them prefer to be called. She was subject to forced family separation, and spent decades attempting to get access to her birth records. She wrote a wonderful play about this search, *Postscript*, and an unforgettable piece on institutions for women and children, *In Plain Sight*, performed last year in a religious building in Roscrea. She is involved in the campaign to stop these apartments being built on the grounds of Bessborough.*

“We are at a tipping point in the history and legacy of what happened in institutions like Bessborough,” she says. “We can literally concrete over the sufferings of those children failed by

Church and State, and their grieving mothers. Or we can fully acknowledge what happened, provide justice and show long-overdue compassion.”

One of the reasons many of us turn away from this subject is a feeling of helplessness – what can we do? Now there is something we can do: submit an observation on the granting of planning permission by Cork City Council, without scrutiny from the councillors, for these apartments.

Please now stop reading and go and put in an observation [here](#). Do it before April 21st. Give Madeleine and Carmel some justice.

In his speech Enda Kenny states “We put away these women because, for too many years we put away our conscience”. I ask where is your conscience? Where is your moral outrage that Ireland allowed HUMAN BEINGS to be treated in this way? The world looks on to see how Ireland will continue to treat women and children and how easily we will put commercial concerns above human rights.

I strongly and definitively object to any building on this land. A full investigation should be carried out as is currently underway in Tuam. Women in Ireland will not cease to protest this case and they will speak out on behalf of those poor souls denied a dignified burial because their sinful existence was deemed too low by the very church and state claiming to be Christian. Building on this land would be a moral travesty. Your decision will reflect the value that you place on the lives of women and children. I ask An Coimisiún Pleanála to heed the words of Enda Kenny and of Catriona Crowe. Do not concrete over the sufferings of children and grieving mothers failed by Church and State. Ireland failed and wronged them in the past- do not do so again now.

Once again, I hereby object to the building on the Bessborough site as it would be morally heinous and utterly disrespectful to those buried in the grounds, to their families and to their mothers who suffered for the remainder of their living days.

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