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“Wash Me Sins Away:” Gendered Punishment and Containment in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries

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Abstract

Between the 1920s and their closure in 1996, Ireland’s Magdalene laundries confined thousands of women and girls who were deemed morally or socially deviant by the combined power of the Church and State. Under the supervision of nuns, the women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor that served as both punishment and a method of moral rehabilitation. The Magdalene laundries operated as instruments of social and institutional containment within a larger established cultural system that regulated women’s behavior in line with an idealized Irish identity defined by chastity and obedience. The Church and State’s obsession with perceived moral degeneration fueled their efforts to both “cure” the nation of such behavior and to conceal the fact that it existed in the first place. The endurance of the institutions throughout the twentieth century was facilitated by both the State’s capitulation to the Church and by public complicity. An ingrained culture of silence and shame normalized the confinement of women and girls, allowing their systemic abuse to persist in what was virtually plain sight.

From the early 1920s to their closure in 1996, Ireland's Magdalene laundries interned thousands of girls and women deemed socially unfit. The women were forced to do unpaid domestic labor under the label of repentance and rehabilitation, directed by various orders of the Catholic Church and supported by the Irish State. While iterations of the laundries had existed for prostitutes and impoverished women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their populations shifted drastically post-independence. In the new Irish State, the laundries increasingly confined the unmarried mothers, girls transferred from other state institutions, such as orphanages, industrial schools, and mother and baby homes, and girls otherwise deemed "backward."[1] The Magdalene laundries served as institutions of moral containment, part of a larger institutional and social system that developed in the decades after their independence to restrict women's behavior in accordance with an idealized Irish identity.

Defined by "purity, chastity, and virtue," Ireland's ideal woman was an embodiment of the new government's aspirations of moral purity, and by extension, a direct contrast to the perceived moral decay of British identity from which the State aimed to separate itself.[2] The Catholic Church and Irish State considered any digressions from these standards, particularly as they manifested through female sexuality, to be threats to the moral foundations of the nation. Their close cooperation to obscure such expressions allowed the laundries to persist throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, this perception of female sexuality at the governing levels of society worked through political, religious, and cultural hierarchies, promoting a notion that rationalized the punishment and confinement of women and girls for the moral betterment of society. This paper relies on the oral histories of survivors to reveal how these systems of discipline were gendered. Through the forced practice of domestic and traditionally feminine forms of labor, the use of moral correction through shame, and the constant enforcement of silence, womanhood in these spaces was purposefully defined by obedience.

Before 2001, there had been little to no scholarship about Ireland's Magdalene laundries, likely due to the taboo surrounding the institutions and social norms of respectability that continued to emphasize the protection of the Church and its convents. Over time, the publishing of survivor accounts and activists' work has challenged this narrative of protection and respectability. In turn, academic writing on the laundries has moved away from brief descriptions of the laundries as "homes for fallen women" to more in-depth analyses of the women and their experiences, as well as the broader systems of Irish institutional containment.

Early mentions of the laundries appeared briefly within broader histories of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, where authors emphasize the profound influence of the Catholic Church on society at the time. Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCaron's *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (2000) is representative of the early approach to the laundries, referenced in passing as "convents that cared for 'Fallen Women'" when discussing the control the Church had over women's roles in society.[3] The first book-length research on the laundries, Frances Finnegan's 2004 *Do Penance or Perish*, explains the transition from their predecessors

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[1] James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 45.

[2] Clara Fischer, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland," *Signs* 41, no. 4 (2016): 822.

[3] Richard B. Finnegan and Edward T. McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 125–138 .

in the eighteenth century as houses of reform for prostitutes to the twentieth-century "female penitentiary systems."[4] Finnegan's focus on the New Shepherd Order limits the scope of the research, and she overlooks the complicity of the State and wider society with her emphasis on the culpability of the nuns who ran the laundries.

Subsequent work follows similar patterns, with scholars noting the laundries as products of the Church's influence on the State in the decades before and after Ireland's independence. Dermot Keogh's chapter "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s" in *The Church Confronts Modernity* (2007) echoes the emphasis on the role of the Church in drafting the Irish Constitution and its moral influence on Irish society. He defines the laundries as homes for "unmarried mothers and/or 'fallen women.'"[5] Lindsey Earner-Byrne's chapter "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60" in *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin* (2007) examines the legal and social stigma of unmarried mothers, with motherhood as something legitimized through marriage.[6] She notes the laundries as an option among the various institutions that an unmarried mother could go to. In both works, the author's descriptions of the populations within laundries are limited. They, and many authors of the time, fail to note both the range of who was confined in them and the broader cultural system that sustained them.

James M. Smith's 2007 *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* was a turning point, becoming a foundational text in Magdalene laundry research through his placement of the laundries within a broader "architecture of containment." By linking the laundries to other state-run institutions, he argues that both their foundation and longevity were due to a state-backed system of nationally gendered incarceration. He describes the systemic and national nature of women's and girls' incarceration through the intersection of legislation, social norms, and national identity.[7]

Since 2007, research on the laundries has largely built on Smith's framework of government- and church-organized institutionalization as a method of control. Rebecca L. McCarthy's *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries* (2010) traces the roots of the laundry system to Ireland's identity as an English colony, arguing that the development of the "convent asylum system" was a result of post-independent Ireland's desire to create a distinct national morality based on the regulation of women's bodies.[8] Similarly, Clara Fischer's "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame" (2016) argues that the laundries were a result of the efforts of the Irish State and the Catholic Church to create an Irish identity that consequently connected the legitimacy of the state to female purity.[9] Such works highlight that the control of the female body was justified for the purpose of nation-building.

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[4] Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish : Magdalen Asylums in Ireland*, 2nd ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

[5] Dermot Keogh, "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s," in *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism since 1950 in the United States, Ireland, and Quebec*, ed. Leslie Woodcock Tentler (Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 93–149.

[6] Lindsey Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60," in *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 172–220.

[7] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 42.

[8] Rebecca L. McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 93.

[9] Fischer, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame," 821–43.

Renewed political advocacy throughout the 2010s was largely incited by the 2013 McAleese Report[10] and Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny's subsequent official apology to laundry survivors. It encouraged scholars to reexamine the combined roles of the church and state, as well as the public's complicity in shaping Smith's proposed "architecture of containment." Sarah-Anne Buckley's 2013 "Institutionalisation, the State and the NSPCC" discusses the broader system of state-funded and church-run institutions, such as industrial and convent schools that institutionalized children in poverty and were often connected directly to the laundries.[11] Bridget Harrison's "Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: campaigning for a Catholic exception" (2021) further reveals how the State enabled the exploitation of women's labor by exempting convents and the laundries from state inspections and labor regulations.[12]

More recent scholarship has turned to retrospective and comparative approaches. Ronit Lentin's "A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland" (2013) traces how systems of institutional control have emerged in the twenty-first century over the control of immigrant reproductive rights.[13] Sharon Tighe-Mooney's "Irreconcilable Differences?: The Fraught Relationship between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland" (2017) examines how the legacy of the laundries played a role in Ireland's social and political separation from the Catholic Church.[14] Sarah A. Whitt's "Wash Away Your Sins: Indigenous and Irish Women in Magdalene Laundries and the Poetics of Errant Histories" (2023) applies the framework of institutionalization to the experiences of Indigenous women and girls in boarding schools, industrial schools, and American Magdalene laundries.[15] These studies aim to apply frameworks that have been developed around laundries to both modern-day and more global structures of gendered containment.

Within the context of a relatively recent historiography, this paper primarily builds on the argument that the Church and State collaborated to achieve an Irish moral order through control over the female body. Using survivor testimonies, it will examine how this manifested in the gendered containment and punishments of the women and girls in the laundries. While much scholarship tends to understate the general public's awareness of the laundries' existence, this paper takes the stance that much of the public was aware of their existence; however, the social architecture of twentieth-century Ireland was built on a deeply ingrained deference to the authority of the Church that both concealed the actions of the laundries and resisted any investigation into them.

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[10] Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries" (2013), 1.

[11] Sarah-Anne Buckley, "Institutionalisation, the State and the NSPCC." In *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 110.

[12] Bridget Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: campaigning for a Catholic exception," *Irish Historical Studies* 45, 168 (2021): 223–38.

[13] Ronit Lentin,"A Woman Died: Abortion and the Politics of Birth in Ireland," *Feminist Review*, no. 105 (2013): 130–36.

[14] Sharon Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?: The Fraught Relationship between Women and the Catholic Church in Ireland," in *Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond*, ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (Manchester University Press, 2017), 192.

[15] Sarah A. Whitt, "Wash Away Your Sins: Indigenous and Irish Women in Magdalene Laundries and the Poetics of Errant Histories," *American Indian Culture And Research Journal* 46, no. 3 (2023): 3.

In 1767, philanthropist Arabella Denny opened the first Magdalene laundry, then called a Magdalen asylum, specifically for Protestant "fallen women," or prostitutes.[16] There, the women would work for their room and board and could only leave with permission once they secured outside employment or housing. Denny's Magdalen Asylum set a model for the philanthropic homes that began appearing in higher quantities throughout the nineteenth century. As Ireland industrialized and urban internal migration increased, various religious orders established new laundries to address the issues they saw emerging in the rapidly changing social landscape. The convents that ran them positioned themselves as moral authorities, attempting to restore Ireland's social stability after the immense upheaval of the famine and rapid industrial growth. The orders themselves varied in origin and specific purpose, with some international orders arriving with the intention of opening laundries, while others, typically those founded in Ireland, took on a wider range of duties that involved some form of charitable work.[17] Regardless of their different origins, the institutions ultimately served the same function of regulating women's behavior in response to a gendered moral panic. Convents served simultaneously as networks of social control and as models of female respectability.[18]

This combination of social and religious-moral responsibilities positioned the Catholic Church in alignment with the interests of many Irish politicians of the time. It was during this period of heightened indignation towards the British Parliament that the Church formed a partnership with a group of prominent Irish politicians that was, in essence, codified by the early 1900s. As the British government introduced labor and safety reforms, Irish nationalist politicians vehemently opposed their implementation within convent laundries in defense of the protection and privacy of the nuns running the laundries.[19] After a decade of back and forth, the laundries were eventually exempted from state investigation and interference in 1907, an exemption that continued after Ireland gained its independence in 1922.[20] The Irish Parliamentary Party's close association with and protection of the Catholic Church during British rule established a precedent for the State's allowance of a Church position in the development of policy.

Following the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, this precedent ensured that the Church influenced state-building at almost every level. Both subsequent administrations of the new Ireland, under W.T. Cosgrave (1922–32) and Eamon de Valera (1932–48), embraced the heightened role of the Church in the new government and implemented conservative policies that aligned with the Church's moral values. This Church doctrine was primarily one of "sexual puritanism," seen in the gendered separation of schools and the 1935 ban on the sale of contraceptives.[21] It manifested most clearly in the 1937 Constitution, which recognized the "special position" of the Catholic Church and directly stated that a woman's "life within the home" defined her role in society.[22] These policies were imposed on nearly every aspect of life

[16] McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries*, 238.
[17] Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 21.
[18] Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 225.
[19] Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 233.
[20] Harrison, "Factory and workshop legislation," 223–29.
[21] Finnegan and McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes,* 125–26.
[22] Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 194.

and were largely accepted by a devout Catholic population. The national and social identity became even more entwined with the Catholic Church's moral doctrine.

The collaboration was most visible in the realm of education, where the Church oversaw primary and secondary education with the state's funding. The curriculum was shaped around rigid moral standards and enforced by discipline and a lack of personal choice.[23] Deference to the Catholic Church, then, became a fundamental teaching in the most foundational moment of a child's education, reinforcing the long-standing cultural behavior that allowed the Church to dominate state social policy. After state officials completed the 1931 Carrigan Report, an unpublished but internally influential report on sexual crimes and rising illegitimacy, moral panic surrounding the family and motherhood only grew.[24] Church and state higher-ups largely placed the blame for these issues upon unmarried mothers and "uncontrolled" female sexuality. The popular solution put women in the "institutional care" of the Church, which offered them a sense of relative anonymity, physical shelter, and most importantly, assisted in their "moral regeneration."[25] The general acceptance of this solution set a precedent that allowed Irish state figures to place the management of social issues in the hands of the Church. As a result, these issues were often hidden away for the sake of maintaining Irish Catholic moral reputation, rather than being confronted publicly and directly.

Smith's concept of Ireland's institutional "architecture of containment" demonstrates how the Church's dominance in the new state created and sustained the gendered moral conditions that enabled the laundries to endure throughout the twentieth century. This "architecture" consisted of a network of Church-run and state-supported institutions that were reinforced by state legislation and a public who deferred to church authority unquestioningly.[26] These systems were further representative of a social attitude towards the obfuscation of "social realities," particularly illegitimacy and sexual abuse. This architecture included institutions such as orphanages and industrial schools that functioned similarly to the laundries as places of containment. Although the laundries themselves were not part of the school system, the same religious figures often assigned laundering duties to young girls and women and later transferred them to the laundries. It was this cycle of institutional containment and social acquiescence that transformed the makeup and role of such institutions, from prostitutes in early asylums to a range of young women and girls in early Ireland's Magdalene laundries.

The institutionalization of the children and young adults of Ireland began early on in their lives, facilitated by the Church, State, family, and law enforcement. According to the McAleese Report, the route of entry of the laundries was around 28% undocumented, 27% non-state, 19% state, and 18.6% transfer from other laundries or congregations.[27] The transfer of inhabitants between institutions occurred as they aged out, misbehaved, or became pregnant. Consequently, these church and state authorities frequently transferred a number of the young women in or out of the laundries into other institutions, whether it be an orphanage,

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[23] Finnegan and McCaron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes,* 107.

[24] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 6.

[25] Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60, 176.

[26] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries,* 2.

[27] Department of Justice, "Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries" (2013), 164.

industrial school, or mother and baby home.[28] Irish law enforcement sent a number of girls directly to the laundries, sometimes after months-long court processes and sometimes with no legal process at all.[29] The religious orders that ran the institutions always facilitated these transfers, working in close communication with state officials. Whether organized by the Church and State or by families in consultation with the laundries, admissions into these institutions largely excluded the girls from the decision, disclosing to them as little information as possible. The culture of secrecy gave the Church almost absolute authority over the "correctional" functions of the laundries and allowed the State to maintain an image of national and moral stability.

This general emphasis on the secrecy of the laundries only seemed to intensify between the 1920s and 1960s, as the stigma of untoward female behavior became deeply ingrained within the social consciousness. Families often sent girls to the laundries in an attempt to protect themselves from scandal. One unmarried mother recalled being sent in 1966 "to get away as far as possible" to protect her family's reputation, and especially her siblings' prospects.[30] Often, girls were told that they were acting out of order, with the laundries serving as punishment and a method of behavior control. Another woman, sent in 1967, described being labeled a "problem child" as a way of justifying her removal from her home.[31] In any instance, once inside the laundry, the nuns forbade the girls from discussing why they were there, even if many were never told why they were there in the first place.[32] The laundries thus served as physical manifestations of Ireland's moral contradictions. The religious orders claimed to reform women deemed "likely to fall," yet never fully defined what this meant.[33] Furthermore, both the Church and State refused to investigate the underlying causes of these vaguely defined failures, instead working to preserve the laundries as institutions of concealment to retain a surface-level image of moral purity.

Inside the laundries, the methods of discipline served to instill a sense of shame within the inhabitants. Humiliation, physical and psychological abuse, and unpaid labor all served as methods of control and punishment. Further abuse occurred in the form of medical malpractice and the lack of labor safety procedures, a direct consequence of the state's non-involvement and its assumption of trust in the nuns' corrective methods. While similar forms of abuse occurred in other Church- and State-run institutions, the laundries' particular form of discipline through the daily rituals of work, prayer, and silence was designed to evoke feelings of gendered shame and repentance in its inhabitants.

Among the many methods of discipline described by survivors, the imposition of silence within the laundry was present in every aspect of their daily lives. One 1963 testimony

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[28] Mary Jefferies "Oral History of Mary Jefferies." Interview by Sinéad Pembroke. Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, June 12, 2013, 7

[29] Evelyn, "Oral History of Evelyn," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, March 2, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 3.

[30] Bernadette, "Oral History of Bernadette," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 11, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 6–9.

[31] Martha, "Oral History of Martha," interview by Katherine O'Donnell, February 28, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 15.

[32] Doris, "Oral History of Doris," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, July 23, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 45.

[33] Smith, Ireland's Magdalen Laundries, 46.

described their daily routine as "[w]ork, prayer, sleeping, and a little bit of food," with interactions between the girls highly discouraged.[34] The nuns enforced silence to maintain constant work productivity and to isolate the girls from each other. It further trained them in passivity, as it associated the practice of domestic labor with silence. The silence was often filled with "holy things," such as a nun reading from a Bible as the girls worked, or prayers playing from amplifiers that the girls were expected to repeat as they worked.[35] In the eyes of the State, the nuns were teachers and enforcers of respectable female behavior. The labor of washing laundry served to train women in domestic duties, while the reinforcement of silence and prayer molded them into obedient and penitent women, the ideals of female Irish respectability.

Punishments in the laundries were a combination of bodily and verbal abuse. Testimonies between the 1940s and the 1960s describe hair-shearing upon their arrival, arbitrary beatings, and solitary confinement as commonly used disciplinary practices that occurred under the guise of moral correction. A testimony of a girl who was interred in 1949 describes the use of solitary confinement without a bathroom as punishment for talking back.[36] Nuns often paired physical discomfort and isolation with verbal abuse and victim blaming, all designed to constantly reinforce the girls' supposed moral failings. As late as 1966, a girl described being covered in disinfectant to "wash [her] sins away" upon her entry, later told that she would be given a new name to ensure no one knew who she was.[37] The nuns renamed every girl upon arrival to maintain anonymity, further disconnecting the girl from her identity before she entered the laundry. This purposeful erasure, verbal degradation, and isolation stripped women of their personal identities and instead replaced them with shame that reflected the Church and State's goals of dissuading morally impure behavior.

Abuse further manifested in the laundries' exploitative labor practices and medical malpractice, revealing the consequences of the state's exemption of the laundries from inspection. A survivor described getting burns from scalding wet sheets and being told by a nun that " . . . your arms will get used to it."[38] Medical neglect was equally frequent due to the state's lack of regulation and the nuns' lack of training. In 1967, one woman, sent to a laundry pregnant at fifteen, endured a dangerous pregnancy: she was given sleeping pills and a symphysiotomy by an under-trained nun, afterwards going blind due to untreated preeclampsia.[39] Such neglect reveals how the Church's moral aims were directly connected to the control of women's bodies. Another survivor who lived in a laundry in 1964 described the lack of basic safety protections, saying, "there were bars on the window – the door was locked

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[34] Mary Currington, "Oral History of Mary Currington," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 23, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 23.

[35] Kathleen, "Oral History of Kathleen," interview by Claire McGettrick, July 3, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

[36] Catherine Whelan, "Oral History of Catherine Whelan," interview by James Smith, May 20, 2015, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Rgirlslaundriesesearch Council, 15.

[37] Pippa Flanagan, "Oral History of Pippa Flanagan," interview by Claire McGettrick, August 5, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

[38] Whelan, "Oral History," 24.

[39] Mary Creighton, "Oral History of Mary Creighton," interview by Katherine O'Donnell, May 16, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 32–34.

behind you . . . If there was a fire, you were just a goner."[40] The State's lack of inspection was rationalized through traditional gendered divisions of labor, as extended into social responsibilities. Where the public sphere of politics fell to men, the moral reformation of young women through domestic labor was put in the hands of female religious figures and their private, hidden convents. This separation culminated in the severe oversight of exploitative and abusive labor practices that later enabled the State to deflect responsibility for what occurred within the laundries.

The laundries further withheld information from the penitents about almost every aspect of their incarceration, from entry to exit, leaving many believing they would never be released. A survivor explained that "nobody had a release date . . . until the people who put them in decided . . . I could have probably walked out the door at any given time . . . but not a penny in my pocket to make a phone call to say, 'please come and help me.'"[41] Even if freedom was theoretically possible, the material and psychological isolation in which the women lived made them dependent on the system that incarcerated them. This cycle saw that many women remained in the laundries for life. Multiple testimonies describe living alongside elderly women who had entered the institutions as children and lived their whole lives within the laundries.[42] These women were essentially removed from Irish society with no intention of their reintegration.

A strict hierarchy existed between the nuns and their penitents, clearly demonstrated in their decision to withhold any access to the outside world from the girls. One survivor described the lack of media and information from outside the laundries, saying, "I don't ever remember having a radio, there was no telly . . . that was a sin, having a television. And no newspapers, you were being punished, you see."[43] The disconnect from the outside world served simultaneously to punish the girls and as a way to keep them from negative outside influences. Another attested to the nun's paranoia when visitors came to the laundries, saying, "You would never answer a door if a bell was ringing. You'd have to leave it ringing till one of the nuns went and opened it . . . Because we were inside a big wall."[44] The secrecy was an integral part of the laundries' function, keeping those inside separated from external influence and those outside unaware of who was confined and why.

The oral histories of survivors suggest that the purpose of the laundries remained ambiguous. The nuns gave the girls few answers to their questions regarding why they were there or what the purpose of their "penance" was. One survivor described an interaction she had with a nun in 1958, where the nun described the purpose of the laundries, "to make you fit for the outside world." When the survivor questioned her further, asking, "How am I going to know what's in the outside world if I'm not let out into the outside world?" she was not given an answer. [45] The contradictory and ambiguous nature of what the girls were told, as well as

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[40] Kathleen, "Oral History," 3.

[41] Bernadette, "Oral History," 10.

[42] Doris, "Oral History," 40.

[43] Evelyn, "Oral History," 14.

[44] Jefferies, "Oral History," 9.

[45] Nora Lynch, "Oral History of Nora Lynch," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, July 24, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 22.

every internal aspect of the women's incarceration, denotes the implicit failures of the institution.

Meant to rehabilitate and prepare these women to become respectable and responsible members of society, they were instead systematically punished, shamed, and abused, harming their chances for reintegration into society. One woman, born in 1928, described growing up in an orphanage and working in the laundry as a child, later transferred to various institutions and laundries. Women who grew up in the system often had a more difficult time adjusting to life outside of it, never being taught how to live outside of an institutional system. She said, "It was frightening. I felt I wanted to be back in there again, you know. You get the fear of God back in you because you were entombed in there, weren't you?"[46] Her and many other women's fear and apprehension of living outside the laundries highlights the contradictory nature of the laundries. The laundries, intended to "reform" women's behavior, often held girls who had grown up in Church-run environments, supposedly away from the moral instability of the outside world. The fear many women felt after returning to live in the outside world was the result of living in an environment that equated their existence with obedience and shame.

The longevity of the laundries, while largely dependent on the unwilling submission of its penitents and the State's blind eye, also relied heavily on a broader public complicity, an effect of an ingrained deference to the Church. The public's acceptance of the laundries was based on the paradoxical perception of them as both charitable homes and places where girls disappeared. This paradox was accepted because of an innate trust in the Church's care for the women and girls who lived in the laundries. While many of the women who entered the laundries had never heard of them before, many others were aware of their reputation. One who entered in 1958 described the social reputation of the laundries, comparing them to mental institutions. She said: "It's like if someone's gone down to prison for life, you know they're not going to come out. That was the same effect the Magdalene Laundry had on us. Only mad people or bad people went in there, and that was the end of it."[47] To some people, especially of the younger generation, the laundries were regarded similarly to prisons or mental institutions: places to fear and be threatened with. In any case, public knowledge and perception of the laundries were shaped by a kind of social stigma, rather than any accessible information about them. This reflected a broader social policing and understanding of female sexuality through fear and pressure over education.

The combined fear and reverence of the laundries was reflective of a larger culture of the Church's moral surveillance, as well as the general perception of sex, pregnancy, and illegitimacy.[48] Because such topics were rarely discussed, the understanding of the laundries as secret and stigmatized was a natural extension of this societal manner, one that recognized female sexuality through fear and shame instead of health and education. To the ordinary townsperson, the inhabitants of the laundries were both visible and invisible. Residents were aware of their existence, perceived the buildings in which they resided, and sometimes interacted with the girls, whether they worked for the laundries or saw them around town. However, vague awareness and brief interactions did little to foster a connection between the

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[46] Jefferies, "Oral History", 42.

[47] Margaret Burke, "Oral History of Margaret Burke," interview by Sinéad Pembroke, February 26, 2013, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 21.

[48] Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 194.

girls and the towns' residents. For instance, a student in Limerick in the mid-1960s described a "social gap" between townspeople and the girls that went unquestioned because "[y]ou are brainwashed that the priest is superior and better than you."[49] This similarly shaped the common opinion of the government; both were rooted in an assumption of the Church's moral and spiritual superiority. This deference was so deeply ingrained in Irish daily life that the Church's decisions, including those of its institutions, were understood as beyond criticism.

Other accounts from people who lived near or interacted with the laundries reinforce the degree of literal and psychological separation between the laundries' inhabitants and society. The descriptions of their high walls and "fierce security" emphasize this as a deliberate choice central to their purposes of limiting the influence of supposedly immoral women on the public.[50] Those who interacted with the laundry, such as deliverers or other workers involved with the organization, described the process of entering the building as ". . . a closed-door type of set up" that made it difficult to enter or exit them.[51] This separation, along with the laundries' image as a correctional institution, encouraged the belief that its inhabitants deserved their confinement, an assumption that justified their exclusion. What the public assumed about the laundries from their limited perspectives was only ever enough to stigmatize the women, never enough to challenge the institutions themselves.

Some townspeople further believed that the laundries provided a necessary service for women and girls who would have otherwise been out on the streets. One woman who worked near a laundry and interacted with its inhabitants argued that the laundries "have a very bad reputation . . . and some of it is deserved, but . . . [t]his is a place where they would be fed, where they would be clothed . . . and a lot of them would not have had that."[52] This view, a common one at the time, worked under the assumption that it was only poor or vulnerable girls who were placed in the laundries. Furthermore, the emphasis on what the nuns provided in terms of food, clothing, and shelter demonstrates how the Church was largely able to obscure the realities of what the inhabitants experienced, allowing the public to view the laundries as charitable services. Another outsider recalled that the girls ". . . seemed to be happy enough . . . [and] I think they were well looked after accommodation-wise."[53] Ultimately, the outside perspective, especially in retrospect, reveals both the towns' willingness to let the Church manage the laundries and their reluctance to investigate further into what actually occurred inside them.

The behavior of the girls only increased the psychological distance in their rare interactions with outsiders. They were frequently described as quiet, shy, and keeping to themselves, a practice of what was taught to them within the laundries through punishment and silence. A man who delivered laundry for the Good Shepherd convent noted that paid workers only interacted with nuns and that "[t]he women were kept behind the scenes . . . They

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[49] Michael Cowhey, "Oral History of Michael Cowhey," interview by Evelyn Glynn, August 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 4.

[50] Pat O'Byrne, "Oral History of Pat O'Byrne," interview by Evelyn Glynn, October 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

[51] O'Byrne, "Oral History," 2.

[52] Anne Culhane, "Oral History of Anne Culhane," interview by Evelyn Glynn, December 2008, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Research Council, 1.

[53] O'Byrne, "Oral History," 2.

were very shy."[54] Another man who grew up around a laundry and saw the girls on their supervised walks said, "They wouldn't be allowed to stop and speak to you now or anything like that – like school kids."[55] Such behavior reflected the nuns' control both inside the laundries and in how the girls presented themselves in public. Their silence and shyness were deliberately molded into them through training and punishment meant to instill obedience.

In this way, the State's goal of teaching traditionally feminine manners through the nuns was successful, reinforcing the belief that the laundries were places of moral correction. However, a woman who worked with children from a laundry described them as fearful and reserved, saying: "They were never happy. There was a great fear there – no matter what you were doing with them."[56] The reformatory nature of the laundries was, in many cases, traumatic for the girls, with their discipline and reserve in public reflecting this. Ultimately, these outside accounts reveal a split between what the public chose to perceive and what the institutions perpetrated. While much of what they saw raised questions, it was interpreted and rationalized then through an unwavering trust in the Church's intentions.

This selective perception continued into the early 1970s. While little was discussed on the laundries themselves, mother and baby homes began gaining attention, with mixed opinions of their roles in society. The homes served a similar function to the laundries, administered by the state and run by religious orders to train unmarried pregnant women in domestic occupations (such as laundry work) for a period of time during and after their pregnancies.[57] In a 1970 article interview with both a Church representative and a Dublin Health Authority official, the author stressed the "bright" and "cheerful atmosphere" of a Dublin location.[58] The article emphasizes the anonymity of the women and girls there and further presents it as a refuge for them. Both the Mother Superior and the State representative insisted that "the girls feel accepted and loved," that "[t]he idea that people had that the homes are punitive is totally wrong," and that ultimately, the decision to place one's baby for adoption was solely the mother's. This rhetoric was frequently used when discussing the laundries, framed around the protection of the girl and reinforcing her need for privacy, which ultimately kept both institutions from any outside inspection or criticism. In both cases, the Church's intervention is framed as a necessary function in society. Despite some push for liberal reform in the late 1970s, Irish society continued to uphold an image of the Catholic Church's benevolence that hid its coercion over the country's morality.

The 1980s ushered in changes that saw a society caught between liberalising reform measures, such as legalized contraception, and attempts by the Catholic Church to maintain its grip on the state and the culture.[59] By the 1990s, neither the Church, the State, nor the public could comfortably preserve the idea of the Church's uncontested moral superiority. The reveal of a series of scandals, including allegations of clerical sexual abuse and abuse in State- and

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[54] O'Byrne, "Oral History," 1.

[55] John Gilligan, "Oral History of John Gilligan," interview by Evelyn Glynn, December 2008, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 4.

[56] Mary O'Mara, "Oral History of Mary O'Mara," interview by Evelyn Glynn, June 2010, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History, Irish Research Council, 2.

[57] Earner-Byrne, "Illegitimate Motherhood, 1922–60," 187–9.

[58] Mary Anderson, "These mothers are not outcasts of today," *Irish Independent (Dublin)*, Nov 28, 1970, 7.

[59] Tighe-Mooney, "Irreconcilable Differences?" 200.

religious-run institutions, caused a drastic shift in public opinion that forced Ireland to confront what had been swept under the rug for the previous decades. The Church's mismanaged responses to these allegations created a "crisis of credibility" that persisted for the following decades.[60] As scrutiny intensified at the end of the twentieth century, this attention became directed at the laundries. Questions arose regarding what actually occurred within them, as well as how State powers and societal complicity had allowed them to persist unquestioned for as long as they did.

One such crisis of credibility occurred after it was revealed in 1993 that the High Park convent had exhumed a mass grave containing the remains of 155 women who had lived and died in the laundry. After this story broke, many laundry survivors and family members of survivors felt encouraged to come out with their stories. These early interviews align with the oral histories conducted in 2013, with one survivor describing grueling hours of work, uncertain terms of release, and the constantly enforced silence that constituted daily life. In addition to the survivor testimony, the article is notable in its description of the laundries and their deviation from their original intentions: "[I]nstead of just staying a few months in a caring atmosphere, many girls remained shut away for decades."[61] In another account from the daughter of a woman who had been in the Irish care system, she described finding no other record of her mother, not even her death certificate.[62] The perception of the laundries after the discovery shifted drastically from one of a temporary home for wayward girls to one of mass interment and disappeared women.

The exhumation of the High Park mass grave further forced the Irish public to come to terms with the generational and emotional implications of the laundries. Among the most controversial debates centered on the remembrance of the Magdalene laundries and their survivors. Various opinion pieces throughout the early 1990s reveal a combination of outrage, shock, and defensiveness. One rather controversial article criticized what the author saw as "a flurry of unfocused moral outrage," arguing that the outcry over the mass grave should instead be directed at the nuns' treatment of the women while they were still alive.[63] Other opinions defended the laundries, with one characterizing them as "the best shot [of] an ignorant society . . . at providing humane care for its physical and mental rejects" and sympathizing with the nuns as victims of "rigid class structures."[64] Such rhetoric views the laundries as necessary, if harsh, products of their time, displacing blame onto a past society rather than the Church and State's combined authority or societal blindness.

The author's interviews of those who came to pay respects at the grave reveal a different narrative. For many families, outrage stemmed from the continued injustice the women received in both life and death, saying, ". . . the nuns conveniently forgot that relatives exist. It seems that the Magdalen women, unworthy in life, were also found unworthy in

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[60] Keogh, "The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s," 133.

[61] Terry McGeehan, "Fate of 'Fallen Girls' is Exposed," *The Star (Dublin)*, Jul 28, 1993, 13.

[62] Catherine Murphy, "Heartbreak search for 'my Magdalen'" *Evening Herald (Dublin)*, September 9, 1993, 3.

[63] Eilis O'Hanlon, "Humbug and a flurry of unfocused moral outrage," *Sunday Independent (Dublin)*, September 19, 1993, 15.

[64] Patricia Redlich, "Last respects paid to society's lost souls," *Sunday Independent (Dublin),* September 25, 1993, 4.

death."[65] She describes the conflict and grief of the families of those women and girls who had effectively been erased from society. Rather than framing them as past incidents of an older society, these accounts place the laundries in real time and demonstrate how such erasure produced a generational trauma based on the gendered erasure of female family members.

The institutions themselves worked to placate the anger and control the rapidly changing narrative of the laundries. An interview with a representative from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity reveals the internal view of some nuns at the time. She acknowledged that "[t]here are many things that we would feel sorry for," and suggests that, with hindsight, they would have likely done it differently.[66] Ultimately, though, she ascribes the treatment to simply a product of the time. With pressure directly on the Church, their response was to portray the laundries as misguided results of historical circumstance, offering vague acknowledgement of fault but ultimately refusing to take full responsibility. The Church's attempts at curbing public outrage were largely unsuccessful on all fronts, partially due to the State's silence on the matter. As Ireland moved into the twenty-first century, the Church's moral authority had lessened significantly.

Despite the closure of the final laundry in 1996, the systems of containment and social paranoia still exist. As Ireland has secularized in the twenty-first century, public anxieties and notions of an Irish identity have become detached from the authority of the Church, yet remain connected to the control of female bodies. Contemporary fears surrounding a "pure" Irish identity have been projected onto immigrant mothers and their children. Where twentieth-century Irish Catholic fears deemed "fallen women" and illegitimacy as threats to the moral purity of the nation, immigrant bodies now threaten the perceived modern Irish national identity. The 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which revoked birthright citizenship from children with non-Irish parents, reasserts a notion of national control through women's bodies and reproduction.[67] Control over national reproductive trends is now defended through secular nationalism, rather than through religious moral concerns.

In this way, the Magdalene laundries were not unprecedented institutions that suddenly appeared in Ireland, nor do they remain in its history. They emerged from centuries of gendered carceral practices and developed into a wider institutional system that allowed for the moral regulation of female behavior. The enduring nature of the laundries was due not to a single actor, but to a misogyny ingrained in the formation of the country that was embedded in practices of the Church, State, and Irish society. The closure of the last laundry in 1996 did not see the automatic disappearance of these structures, but rather their evolution. While the authority of the Catholic Church was decreased substantially, the use of women's bodies in the construction of a modern Irish identity has persisted.[68] Ireland's "architecture of containment" manifests today less as a tool for regulating women's morality, but rather as a framework used to regulate the boundaries of who counts as Irish.

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[65] Redlich, "Last respects paid to society's lost souls," 4.
[66] Star Reporter, "Nuns 'Sorry' Now Over Magdalens," *The Star (Dublin)*, September 13, 1993, 13.
[67] Lentin, "a woman died: abortion and the politics of birth in Ireland," 131.
[68] Lentin, "a woman died: abortion and the politics of birth in Ireland," 130.

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