



20th February 2013

The ICA responds to Senator McAleese's report on the Magdalene Laundries:

The ICA is the largest membership organisation of women in Ireland and as such takes a very keen interest in areas that affect women's lives as well as the history of the women of this state. The publication of Senator McAleese's report into the lives of the women who spent time in the Magdalene laundries is long overdue however the ICA welcomes the report and feels that it represents a vindication of their work and an opportunity to honour these women who continue to be psychologically and physically affected by the suffering and stigma associated with the time they spent in the laundries.

ICA welcomes the report by Senator McAleese: The ICA warmly welcomes the report as independent and cost effective. A more costly route could have been chosen by way of a tribunal or an enquiry and the mere €11,146.06 that was spent as well as the cost of room hire and travel expenses salaries is a fraction of the millions that was spent on each of the four statutory reports on abuse since 2005. The choice of entrusting this report to Senator McAleese is well received as the report was relatively short in execution at only 18 months duration. Some dignity has been preserved by the nature of the interviews conducted by Senator McAleese as well as the 800 pages of testimony and 4,000 pages of archival evidence documenting the role of the state in incarcerating women and girls in the laundries.

ICA comments on the independence and subject areas of the report: The ICA notes the complete nature of the report including State records, files and records of Government Departments, records of other relevant State bodies and agencies (Probation Service, An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, the Prison Service, the Health Service Executive, Local Authorities, Ordnance Survey Ireland, the Defence Forces and the Health and Safety Authority) as well as Oireachtas debates, and the reports of previous inquiries (whether previously published or not); The archives of the Religious Congregations which operated the Laundries and the archives of each Diocese in which a Magdalen Laundry was located; Archives of relevant non-governmental bodies and organisations; and Publicly available sources such as newspaper archives and academic publications. As well as the input from Retired civil and public servants, including retired members of An Garda Síochána, retired Probation Officers, retired Factories Inspectors and retired Prison Officers, The Religious Sisters who operated and worked in the Magdalene Laundries and Representative and Advocacy Groups and finally Historians.

The ICA also applauds the subject areas of the report including the history of the laundries the relevant legislation and the different chapters given over to routes of entry into the laundries and the state involvement in that route of entry. Also of note in the report is the state funding and financial assistance including state contracts for laundry services, and the financial viability of the laundries.

ICA comments on the content of the report: The ICA was surprised at the level of urban women versus rural women who were sent to laundries. As well as the fact the lengths of stay varied enormously from only a few weeks up to many years with more than 35.6% only staying for less than 3 months. The ICA notes with empathy that the efforts of the nuns in the various orders to help the women in their charge, was genuine. The nuns offered refuge and the laundry operations provided means of financial support.

The ICA read with regret chapter 19 on the living and working conditions of the women in the laundries and noted that there has been very little direct information in the public domain on this issue, principally because the women concerned have generally either had no opportunity to share their experiences, or have felt unable to do so due to a continuing fear of stigma or judgement.

One fact that struck the ICA is of the numbers of women who were admitted to the laundries from 1922 - 1996 is a similar figure to the current membership of the ICA.

The level of state involvement is of particular regret based on the statement by Mr Batt O Keefe on 3rd October 2009 stating "The Magdalene laundries were privately owned and operated establishments which did not come within the responsibility of the State. The State did not refer individuals to the Magdalene laundries nor was it complicit in referring individuals to them." We now know from the McAleese report that the committee found evidence of direct state involvement in each of the 5 areas examined namely:

- A. Routes by which girls and women entered the Laundries;
- B. Regulation of the workplace and State inspections of the Laundries;
- C. State funding of and financial assistance to the Laundries (including contracts for laundry services);
- D. Routes by which girls and women left the Laundries;
- E. Death registration, burials and exhumations.

We now know that the State inspected the Laundries under the Factories Acts, and in doing so, the State oversaw and furthered a system of forced and unpaid labour, in violation of countless legal obligations.

As stated in the ICA constitution, one of the main objects of the Association is "to advance education". The ICA has been a committed protagonist of the education of Women for over one hundred years and notes with great regret how all education was denied to the children of the Magdalene laundries. This would have had major implications on the lives of women after they had left the laundries contributing to their loss of confidence in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The violation of the right to education is one of the most damaging effects suffered by survivors of the laundries.

One of the saddest aspects of the report as Senator McAleese states in his introduction was that many girls and women were placed in the laundries by their own families, for reasons that we may never know or fully understand, but which included the socio-moral attitudes of the time as well as familial abuse.

Irish society, community and even family played a part in writing this chapter. The Magdalene atrocities happened because Ireland allowed them to happen.

In many cases these women had been incarcerated by the state, which was responsible for the issue of laundry service contracts. The state was responsible for the inspection of laundries and also it was the state that decided who left the laundries and who stayed. Finally, when a woman died in the laundry, it was the state that was responsible for the registration of their death, the organisation of their burial and sometimes their exhumation. All of the work that women did in the laundries was totally unpaid and not registered for social welfare purposes. Accepting that the state was a major influence in their lives the Irish Countrywomen's Association calls for these women to be given a full contributory Social Welfare Pension at the full rate which would acknowledge the years of unpaid work by the women and for which no social welfare contributions / stamps were ever recorded.

In solidarity with the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries the ICA has asked its members to hold "a minute's silence" at their next Federation and Guild meetings throughout the country. Acknowledging the suffering, loneliness, poverty and violation of human rights that more than 10,000 women endured.

Ends.

Notes to Editors:

About Irish Countrywomen's Association

The Irish Countrywomen's Association is a women's organisation with almost 11,000 members. In 2010 we celebrated our Centenary and a very long tradition of making a difference in women's lives. Fun, friendship and support are at the centre of everything that we do – but we also aim to make women's voices heard on the issues of the day.

ICA members meet in local groups across the country - almost 563 Guilds each of which offers a varied programme of activity including trips and visits, crafts and art, interesting speakers, competitions and a whole lot more.

At An Grianan, Co Louth, the ICA Adult Education College provides members and the general public with a varied programme of courses and events, as well as facilities for meetings and Conferences.

A founding member of the National Women's Council of Ireland, the ICA is also the Irish representative on COFACE, the European NGO that represents families at the EU, and is a long standing member of the ACWW – the Associated Countrywomen of the World - which works to improve the situation of rural women, particularly in the developing world.

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