



Justice for Magdalenes

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ACADEMIC CULTURAL SOCIAL POLITICAL

SUMMARY

Women who were incarcerated in Irish Magdalene laundries were awarded a State apology and redress scheme in 2013 following a four-year campaign by Justice for Magdalenes (JFM). UCD researcher Associate Professor Katherine O'Donnell was one of five people in JFM, which involved two academics, a lawyer and two adoption-rights activists who had founded the campaign. They made legal arguments based on evidence gathered in the archives and by collecting oral histories or spoken accounts relating to the time. They widely publicised their findings to raise national and international awareness about the punitive regime of the Magdalenes, and helped to mobilise an effective social justice movement.

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RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

Before this research, most information about the Magdalenes, Church-run institutions or asylums where women were confined, had been transmitted through works of drama and two documentary films that had never been broadcast in Ireland. JFM's research based on archive material and interviews with more 93 people has now provided the most complete and reliable detail of the Magdalene regime and the Irish State's involvement.

Associate Professor Katherine O'Donnell began to work on the research project with Professor James Smith at Boston College in June 2009. The evidence underpinned argument by barristers Maeve O'Rourke and Raymond Hill, in a 145-page submission to the Irish State, which cross-referenced 3,707 archival pages and 795 pages of selected survivor and witness testimony. The submission demonstrated how the Irish State had breached domestic and constitutional law and contravened international treaties in relation to the Magdalenes.

Some of the key findings were that on entry the inmates' hair was shorn, they were given a uniform, a religious name and number and were treated as 'penitents' who had to atone for 'sins' through forced, unpaid, hard labour at laundry and needlework. The inmates were often cold, food was meagre and poor, sanitary and hygiene facilities were degrading and communication was forbidden. For insubordination, inmates were punished by solitary confinement without food. The older population was 'institutionalised' and co-inmates could disappear without explanation. Irish Government departments provided lucrative State contracts to the religious orders. Courts sentenced girls and women, and never followed up in securing their release at the end of their sentences. Gardaí searched for escapees and returned them to the Magdalenes, and girls and women were sent from residential schools, County Homes, and Mother and Baby Homes.



Press conference February 5th 2013



Labour Party Thirst for Justice Award

RESEARCH IMPACT

Associate Professor O'Donnell has made many public presentations on the research, either as an individual or in conjunction with her four JFM colleagues. The audiences have included: relevant ministers and Government officials from departments whose involvement with Magdalene institutions could be demonstrated; cross-party groups of TDs and Senators in Dáil Éireann (on three occasions); the Archbishop of Dublin, Cardinal Brady and a number of Bishops; national and international conferences organised by universities; Non-Government Organisations (NGOs); trade unions and Human Rights bodies (most notably the UN Committee on Social and Economic Rights in Geneva).

Associate Professor O'Donnell contributed to numerous Parliamentary Questions and to JFM reports submitted to the Irish Human Rights Commission, the UN Committee Against Torture, the UN periodical review of Ireland, the Committee to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Inter-Departmental Committee to Inquire into State Involvement into the Magdalene Institutions (IDC). Her research has been cited in eight journal articles/book chapters with a number of other journals and books in draft or in production.

"The oral histories I collected were used by a number of sonic artists including the composer Mary King," she explains. "I worked with TrueTube to produce award-winning educational material suitable for Transition Year students to inform them of ethical implications of the Magdalene issue."

As part of JFM Associate Professor O'Donnell was involved in producing many press releases on newsworthy aspects of the research and in cultivating good relationships with broadcast and print journalists in Ireland and abroad. International interest was strong and key to a successful justice campaign. She gave many interviews and wrote opinion pieces for media outlets, which put the Magdalene issue into public awareness and informed and guided a movement for an apology and redress.

The public education campaign was enhanced through strong alliances with four NGOs: Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA), Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), Amnesty International-Ireland, and in particular the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI), who strenuously joined with JFM in lobbying efforts.

When an Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) was established to Inquire into State Involvement into the Magdalenes, under the chairmanship of Senator Martin McAleese, the departments brought into the inquiry were those that JFM had previously shown were involved with Magdalene institutions.

Associate Professor O'Donnell was involved in drafting a detailed document on what a Magdalene redress scheme ought to entail, and when Justice Quirke made recommendations to the State on redress, he referred to and incorporated many elements of JFM's scheme. To date 824 women have applied to the Magdalene Redress Scheme.

In May 2013, as the State agreed to Justice Quirke's redress scheme, JFM formally ended the justice campaign and reconstituted as JFM Research (JFMR) to develop and further disseminate the research in partnership with former Magdalene women.

The group is currently working with Dublin City Council (who own the Sean McDermott Street Magdalene) as well as owners of the Magdalenes in High Park, Drumcondra and Donnybrook to organise a consultation of Magdalene women on memorialisation and the legacy of those institutions.

REFERENCES

Awards:

- *Feminist Review* Trust Grant Aid for piloting Oral History Project, 2011
- Irish Research Council Collaborative Research Project, 2012
- JFM was awarded the Irish Labour Party's Annual Jim Kemmy 'Thirst for Justice Award' 2013;
- An educational video and lessons I devised with TrueTube and Prof. Gordon Lynch of the University of Kent <https://www.truetube.co.uk/film/magdalenes> won the British Universities Learning On-Screen Award: First Place, 2014 and was shortlisted the same year by Sandford St Martin's Trust for Promoting Excellence in Religious Programming;
- The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council awarded Prof. Gordon Lynch and me a grant to establish a Ph.D. studentship (2015-2019) to research the Magdalene Oral History collection.
- JFM was awarded the Lord Mayor of Dublin's Award, 2016.

Websites:

- Justice for Magdalenes Research <http://www.jfmresearch.com>
- Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Oral and Archival History <http://www.jfmresearch.com/home/oralhistoryproject>

Selected relevant publications that cite my work:

- Irish Research Council specially commissioned infographic highlighting research projects aimed at improving the lives of made particular mention of my work see: http://www.research.ie/intro_slide/irish-research-council-mark-iwd2017-highlighting-research-improving-women%E2%80%99s-lives
- Justice John Quirke, The Magdalen Commission Report <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf/Files/THE%20Quirke%20report.pdf>
- Stephen Winter, 'Two Models of Monetary Redress: A Structural Analysis' Victims & Offenders. 2017 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2017.1280108>