

Seminar on Magdalene Trauma

SESSION 4 (hybrid)

“Forced labour as Magdalenism in Ireland’s Industrial Schools”

SPEAKER: Dr Mary Harney



MONDAY 26 JANUARY 2026, 10-11 am
The Bridge Room (HRB), University of Galway

Link: <https://universityofgalway-ie.zoom.us/j/95143791007?pwd=OfhXVKr1knJulHcBbvMIZklsrJZ3j.1>

Seminar organised by Dr Marine Berthiot

Contact: marine.berthiot@universityofgalway.ie

ABSTRACT

In the history of Irish Carceral Institutions in the 20th Century, the Magdalene Laundries are most often associated with penance, and punitive working conditions in the systematic attempt of the Catholic Church to reform the euphemistic ‘fallen women’ whom Irish society deemed had transgressed the moral rulings of the Church.

This notion of Magdalenism extended to single women who gave birth outside of the bounds of marriage. The mothers and their babies were subjected to incarceration in the Mother and Baby Institutions. These institutions were designed to impose penance on women in an attempt to reform them of their transgressions. Their children were deemed to be the result of sin and deemed by the Government and the church to be illegitimate. This nomenclature, in essence, deprived thousands of children of their civil and human rights.

The most egregious form of punishment meted out to the mothers was the separation from, and often illegal taking of their children. In this way Magdalenism was perpetuated through the children. Thousands of children were siloed into the industrial school systems through the courts, by law enforcement officers, their local parish priests, and by parents who through poverty could not support their children.

Less often discussed in the narratives of Magdalenism is its application to the lives of industrial school children. The revelations of children engaged in punitive forced labour to benefit the institutions financially were exposed through the efforts of investigative journalists in the early 1990s. Commissions of enquiry were set up to investigate the claims of former inmates of the institutions. The investigations by the Commissions corroborated those claims.

It is this aspect of Magdalenism I will discuss today because I am one of the former industrial school children with lived experience of this form of Magdalenism.

Mini-Biography

Dr Mary Harney, PhD Human Rights Law: Born in a Mother and Baby Institution in Ireland in 1949, my mother was forced to give me up for fostering when I was two and a half years of age. My identity was changed by the nuns in the institution in collaboration with the state and the people who fostered me. At five years of age, I was removed from my foster parents because of their cruelty and neglect. Through the court system, I was sentenced to be incarcerated in an Industrial School until I was sixteen years of age.

I suffered many privations in the sixteen years of my incarceration, which included beatings and hard labour. The denial of food and drink was also part of systemic punishments. The worst deprivation I experienced, however, was the denial of a complete education. It took me until the early 1990s to be accepted for a college degree. Since then, I have gained a BA in Human Ecology, an MA in Irish Studies, an LLM in International Human Rights, and an honorary MA in Philosophy. In October 2025, I successfully completed my PhD in human rights at the ICHR.

I have been an activist for social justice causes for over fifty years. I am one of the subjects in a documentary *Testimony* (2025) that follows the lives of various Irish citizens who were incarcerated in Ireland’s notorious institutions for unmarried women and their children. The documentary has won two awards, the most prestigious being the Human Rights award from the IHREC.



Funded by the
European Union



“This seminar has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101204833 – Magdalene Trauma”.

“Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the University of Galway. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them”.