

Volume 3

Magdalene Laundries,
Industrial Homes and Workhouses



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

“ You know, they made you feel as if, you know, it was a very great crime you’d committed, you know. I just felt I could not understand what I’d really done. I couldn’t understand what I’d really done wrong, you know.

“ It was very much about you know repenting about you know about sinning. It was about sinning, not even being stupid, it was about sinning, it was about going against God.

“ It’s, not nice, why should these things be hidden from you? You know it’s, 60 years ago. It’s not the last 5 years. Society has changed an awful lot in the last 20 years, never mind 60 years, so for things still to be hidden and still cloak and dagger, it’s not right.

“ They were making you break stones for a road to go nowhere. That’s basically what it was like. Everything all had to be, because idle hands and all that sort of thing.

“ I do remember it being better than being at home, which isn’t quite...but it was because of family circumstances I guess that it was horrific for me at home so, I remember I was working in a laundry.

“ I often try and picture it. That she was going to head for the Workhouse for that was the only place that girls like her could stay or visit. There was nowhere else for you. And she had another sister who left home and didn’t want to know anything about Mother.

“ *It is an attack on your self-worth, it erodes your confidence, it devalues you, makes you feel isolated and ‘different’ from the rest. It also brings to the fore a host of abandonment issues and these are what have haunted me my whole life. They have led me to make foolish decisions within relationships, interfered with my trust and left me vulnerable to loneliness and feelings of unworthiness. I could be in a crowded room and feel like the only person there.*

“ *And it was just like, the overriding feelings were shame and punishment and the shame doesn’t leave you.*

“ *I said ‘You left me with them.’ People that was embittered old women, who tortured us mentally, who gave us nothing but discourse, who made you feel so rotten [crying] about yourself, [sobbing].*

“ *They were fixated on the sin; that was all you heard: ‘Pray for your sin.’*

“ *I looked out this window, my sister looked out that window, I was absolutely scared and terrified. I was on a road that I didn’t know, I didn’t know where I was going, nobody, nobody, told us where we were going or why we were going. Those whole two years nobody spoke about why we were where we were.*

“ *My mother got a year [in a St Mary’s institution], a year for underage or whatever. I don’t know what she got a year for.*

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Chapter 1

The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's
Institutions and Laundries: The Background



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Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** The GSS and how their institutions operated
- 2.0** What the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) tells us about St Mary's laundries in Northern Ireland
- 3.0** Magdalene laundries and the long-term impact of institutionalisation
- 4.0** The GSS in Belfast
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This chapter is the first of four on the Good Shepherd Sisters (GSS) St Mary's institutions or, as they are sometimes called, Magdalene laundries. It provides a background to their origins and explains debates that have taken place, both historically and more recently, about how they functioned. Most significantly, controversies have arisen about the nature of work carried out in the laundries that operated within all the GSS St Mary's institutions across the island of Ireland. The GSS have always maintained that they provided training for girls and women who were in dire need and that the monies they raised provided the finances to clothe, feed and put a roof over the heads of those individuals. However, critics argue that girls and women were confined to the laundries and worked without pay, for many decades, until their deaths, in some cases. There have also been disputes about the conditions within the St Mary's institutions and the treatment of girls and women who lived and worked in them. These debates led one recent academic assessment to claim that the Magdalene laundries are 'now almost synonymous with forced labour, unlawful detention, family separation and physical and mental distress'.¹

This chapter explains the origins of the GSS St Mary's institutions and their operation of commercial laundries. It will detail how they came to feature in the work of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) and outline some of the criticisms of both the GSS and the state that were made by the HIAI. The chapter will then explain the context around the history of each of the three GSS convents that were established in what became Northern Ireland (NI). A GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry was opened in Belfast, in Derry/Londonderry and in Newry in 1867, 1919 and 1947 respectively and, in each case, a commercial laundry was part of the business model around which the GSS planned the economics of the institution.

1.0 The GSS and how their institutions operated

The GSS' origins go back to 1641 when John Eudes established the Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge religious order. The GSS website explains that its primary purpose was to 'offer refuge' to women and girls seeking escape from 'poverty, prostitution and other forms of exploitation'. Developing this mission, in 1829 Sister Mary of Saint Euphrasia established a new community in Angers, France, which she named 'Good Shepherd'.² Religious institutions that deemed it their task to 'rescue' and 'reform' girls and women involved in sex work or in danger of becoming involved in it have a long history in Europe, going as far back as the eleventh century. They referred to themselves variously as 'refuges for penitents', 'houses of repentance' and 'hostels of God'.³

Within the GSS institutions were two categories of 'penitents'. There was a minority who became 'consecrated penitents' and the majority who did not. The 'consecrated penitents' were women and girls who committed to remain within the institution. This was a system developed by the founder of the Order, Sister Mary of Saint Euphrasia. After a two-year 'probation' the GSS assessed if these 'penitents' were sincere in their desire to commit to a spiritual life in the institution. If they decided this was the case, these individuals then took an annual vow, on the Feast of Mary Magdalen, and became 'consecrated penitents'. They continued to live with the other 'penitents' and had a supervisory role as 'trustees' or 'auxiliaries'. The expectation was that they remain within the convent for life, which many did. Like the GSS, they were entrusted with setting an example for the other 'penitents', although they could never join the Order.⁴ In addition, there was another group who chose to withdraw into a contemplative life of silence. They were known first as Magdalen Sisters, then as Sisters of the Cross and finally as Contemplative Sisters of the Good Shepherd.⁵ The GSS have explained that recruits to the Magdalens from among the 'penitents' were joined by other women who had no previous involvement with life in the Good Shepherd convents.⁶

A series of Good Shepherd institutions opened across Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One was opened in Hammersmith, London, in 1840, after the GSS in France became aware that 'rescue homes' in England were monopolised by Protestant organisations.⁷ The GSS opened its first three Irish convents in Limerick (1848), Waterford (1858) and New Ross (1860). When the GSS opened its convent in Belfast (1867), it was the fourth in Ireland and one of over 100 across the world.⁸ Each of them was guided by the 'Motherhouse' in Angers and guidance from Sister Mary of Saint Euphrasia, who issued instructions on how each of the Order's convents should operate. In the 1890s, these rules were published as *Practical Rules for the Use of the Religious of the Good Shepherd for the Direction of the Classes*. The final word in this title references the 'penitents' class', often termed simply 'the class', which included the girls and women sent to the GSS convents. This document provided the model and structures for all activities associated with the 'penitents' who entered the Good Shepherd institutions.⁹ In at least one aspect, the *Practical Rules* has been regarded as a 'progressive' document by nineteenth century standards because it prohibited the use of corporal punishment against any girl or woman who did not comply with the GSS rules and regulations.

The growth of the GSS mission across Europe coincided with rapid urbanisation that fed increased religious concerns about female sexuality in the context of what Christian evangelicals (both Protestant and Catholic) deemed to be the sinfulness of the modern city. Magdalene refuges, which were opened by many other religious organisations as well as the GSS, had a mission to ‘reclaim’ women from a life of sin or to prevent their entry to it.¹⁰ Over time, ‘refuge’ served as an all-inclusive term that covered a range of reasons for which a girl or woman might be sent to one of these institutions. They were part of a wider Christian intervention in the religious and social philanthropy of the nineteenth century. In the case of the GSS convents, assumptions about class and gender influenced a form of philanthropy through which the middle classes sought to control the behaviour of the working classes: in this example, working-class women.

The individuals who were to be ‘reformed’ were girls and women deemed to be sinners or potential sinners as the result of the sexual dangers of the Victorian city. There were no similar institutions for men and boys deemed to be sinful because of any sexually ‘deviant’ behaviour. Women and girls were confined in various denominational ‘refuges’ of all types, not just those operated by the GSS. The majority were from the working-class poor whose lives religious elites, of various denominations, had decided they should reshape and ‘reform’.¹¹

It is important to note that the Sisters who operated the refuges held higher status in society than the girls and women sent to live under their control. At this time there was an ‘acceptance’ that those in religious congregations, including the GSS, were doing ‘God’s good work’. Mary Stuart has explained the rationale.

“

Convent philosophy, whether Protestant or Catholic, centred on women who separated themselves from the world and its corruption. ‘Women of religion’ were deeply influenced by the charitable attitudes of nineteenth century philanthropy and set up convents that took ‘good works’ very seriously and exemplified the ideals of the virtuous woman.¹²

Like many of the other ‘rescue’ and ‘reform’ institutions, those operated by the GSS included a commercial laundry. The historian Linda Mahood explained the role of laundries in the minds of those Victorian ‘reform’ institutions that established them.

“

Laundries were common features of female penitentiaries because they helped cut the costs of inmates’ confinement. More importantly, laundry work served a symbolic function: through laundry work women daily performed a cleansing ritual. They enacted penance for their past sins and purged themselves of their moral contagion.¹³

Profits from the laundries offered the GSS the economic resources necessary to finance the operating costs of their institutions, which were of significant size and scale. They housed numerous GSS as well as the large numbers of girls and women working in the

laundries. The laundry was both 'a prime means of institutional self-maintenance and reformatory work' and 'a kind of symbolic analogue of the task of cleansing sinners'.¹⁴ By the 1880s the laundries in all the GSS convents had 'become substantial commercial enterprises'.¹⁵ For this reason, among others, the hierarchy of life in the GSS convents had an economic use as well as a spiritual one. The presence of consecrated 'penitents', otherwise known as auxiliaries, provided a source of continuous and experienced labour that could train the constant flow of newly arrived girls and women.¹⁶

Those who worked in the GSS laundries did so without pay. This is one of the issues that in recent years led to critiques of the system. However, the central parts of those critiques had emerged in the nineteenth century. The *modus operandi* of the Good Shepherd laundries was critiqued on the grounds of social justice from, at least, the 1890s. Philosophical attacks on the laundries did not come solely from non-Catholics. Criticism of the system arose first in France, which was home to the Order's 'Motherhouse' in Angers.

The Catholic Bishop of Nancy claimed that the GSS were 'obliged in justice and charity to pay fixed rates of wages to the inmates' of their French laundries. The Bishop alleged that 'they give no help...to the young women and persons who leave the house having worked there for five, ten, fifteen and twenty and thirty years'.¹⁷ This last point was a reference to suspicions that it was against the GSS' interest to encourage women to leave their institutions if the economic success of the establishment was based on a continuous and consistent supply of labour to maintain the laundry's profitability.

Debate about this matter also took place in England. Liberal Catholic thinkers in England urged the GSS to pay wages to the 'penitents'. One such plea was made in *The Economic Journal* by Virginia Crawford in 1901.¹⁸ Among her arguments was the claim that the welfare of the women was subordinated to that of the institution, with commercial laundry operations requiring a steady supply of free labour to maintain their economic viability. She was concerned that keeping the 'penitents' in the laundry, often for many years, left them institutionalised and unprepared for life outside the convent. Moreover, as they became more highly skilled laundresses, their value to the Sisters increased, creating an incentive not to offer alternative forms of training that might prepare them more broadly for employment outside the convent. Anticipating more recent arguments about institutionalisation and the greater levels of dependency associated with long-term residency in a convent laundry, Crawford noted that 'the longer they remain shut up within four walls, the less capable they become of fighting the battle of life outside'.¹⁹

Crawford's arguments won the support of influential English Catholics, particularly those with more liberal inclinations. It formed one strand of the wider argument under which voluntary institutions operating commercial laundries (including those run by the GSS) were included in the Factory and Workshop Act 1907. This came about after previous legislative attempts to include them had failed. In 1895 the Factories and Workshops Bill was introduced with the aim of improving inspection regimes, and it set maximum daily working hours for workplaces of all kinds. This Bill included convent laundries in its proposed measures. However, after 'overwhelming pressure' from Irish MPs, principally members of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) which 'typically demurred' to the Catholic hierarchy on social matters, they were excluded from the provisions of the Factory and Workshop Act 1895.²⁰ In Ireland, 32 of the 40 laundries of this type operating in 1902

were managed by Catholic religious orders.²¹ Significantly, one of the IPP MPs explained that as practically all the party's MPs had sisters who were nuns, the IPP would be alerted to any problems in the 'conventual laundries' and, in his view, there was no need to include them in this new supervisory role for the state.

The GSS were heavily involved in the campaign to restrict state inspection of these laundries, writing letters to Irish MPs and making their views known in newspapers. They argued that the women working in their laundries required 'privacy' while they were 'reformed' by the institutions. They also argued that these laundries were not profit driven. The only financial target was 'to meet the expenses of the homes and their numerous inmates'.²² The historian Brigid Harrison's work on this issue reveals that there was widespread acceptance that these institutions 'provided a public service'. One MP compared the 'convent laundries' to prisons and highlighted what he described as their 'reformatory nature and their need to maintain discipline'. He also suggested that these institutions should set their own working hours to ensure that 'the residents were not idle'.²³ Those proposing inspection generally did so because the convent laundries had an unfair commercial advantage. Not only were they paying no wages, but they could also, if they wished, impose working hours above the 14-hour days that was the maximum set by the Act of 1895. However, one IPP MP maintained that 'the nuns charge higher prices for the work done in order to avoid as far as possible competing unfairly with ordinary laundries'.²⁴

The leader of the IPP, John Redmond, was MP for Waterford, where there was a GSS convent and laundry. He told Parliament that a convent laundry was 'not in the ordinary sense of the word a real factory at all' and that the legislation should exclude them. He specifically cited the GSS in his speech.



The organisations I refer to are great societies like the Society of the Good Shepherd, which exists in every country in the world, has been employed for years and generations, and perhaps centuries, in carrying on this work, and it has, therefore, the most experience in the carrying on of this work. The members of this Society of the Good Shepherd are unanimously of the opinion that the introduction into their institutions of an outside authority in the shape of Government inspectors would completely destroy the discipline of their institutions and make their already almost impossible task absolutely impossible.

Redmond argued that the religious superiors in the GSS carried out their own inspections and this meant it was impossible that 'insanitary arrangements' or 'improper hours of labour' existed in their laundries.²⁵ Harrison argued that the defence of the 'conventual laundries', as they were called in this debate, framed the GSS convents and others as a private female domestic space that needed to be defended. However, it 'framed the inhabitants of that private space as nuns rather than the women in their care'.²⁶ This framing illustrated how gender and social class shaped the laundries. The laundries represented one method through which society sought to police and reform significant numbers of unfortunate working-class girls and women. To enable this, as the IPP MP made clear, women like his sister – Irish, middle-class women – were entrusted with carrying out that role.

Convent laundries were excluded from both the 1895 Act and the Factory and Workshop Act of 1901. As such, they remained free from compulsory inspections by factory inspectors. However, shortly after the 1901 Act, 117 charitable laundries agreed to undertake a voluntary inspection, while 37 refused. St Mary's, Belfast appears to have been among those inspected in this voluntary phase. The principal 'lady inspector', Adelaide Anderson, led visits to 50 laundries in Ireland and found that many of them did not meet the safety requirements set for commercial operations. Inspectors were often kept waiting when they arrived, giving the laundry management 'time to get their workshops in order'.²⁷ According to a history of the Factory Acts in Ireland, the inspectors were impressed by the profitable nature of laundry work and suggested that commercial considerations were often given preference over the physical well-being of young girls, the training of women for domestic service and the reformatory needs of 'penitents'.²⁸

Finally, another piece of legislation on the same subject, the Factory and Workshop Act 1907, did include the convent laundries under the supervision of the state in the form of the factory inspectors. From that point, GSS laundries were subject to inspection. Their adjacent living quarters were not. Correspondence with the GSS in Derry/Londonderry in 1944 reveals that there had been some 'agitation' in the early 1920s from the Ulster Launderers' Association about the pricing in convent laundries which was undercutting commercial laundries. It appears that in return for agreeing to charge the same prices as commercial laundries, convent laundries were not to be inspected. This deal appears to have been negotiated by the firm of solicitors representing the GSS and John Andrews, the then Minister of Labour.²⁹ This agreement was discussed again in the 1940s when the GSS in Derry/Londonderry came under pressure from the Ulster Launderers' Association and the Ministry of Labour to increase their prices, as they were lower than those being charged by other laundries in the city. It was noted in the correspondence that the GSS laundry in Belfast had already agreed to do this. The GSS in Derry/Londonderry were told that if they did not 'keep in line' there would be 'an agitation' as there had been in the 1920s.³⁰ Given that no trace remains of any inspections carried out by factory inspectors in NI, it would seem that this deal was maintained. In England, the Curtis Report 1946 found that factory inspectors' scrutiny of the convent laundries found them to be often inadequate and that they permitted 'some arrangements which caused us disquiet'.³¹

In one other very controversial area, the GSS laundries, and those of similar religious orders, were excluded from emerging employment and welfare legislation passed by late Victorian and Edwardian British governments. They were not subject to minimum rates of pay set by the Laundry Trade Board, established in 1919.³² A memorandum to all members of this Board, circulated in 1921, explained the exclusion of workers in the convent laundries.



A Convent or Institution with a predominantly religious or philanthropic purpose maintains a number of persons in fulfilment of that purpose. These persons are put to work by the authorities of the institution upon an occupation of the same kind as an occupation within the scope of the Trade Board. In all cases the persons are boarded and lodged at the institution, and in some cases a small money payment by way of pocket money may be made. The inmates of the institution are occupied upon work for members of the public, and a charge is made by the institution for work so performed. The Ministry of Labour has taken the view that Institutions of this kind are not affected by the Trade Board determinations [because] the arrangements between the heads of the institution and the worker appear not [to] be ‘by way of trade’.³³

In effect, work in the Magdalene laundries was not governed by contracts of employment, and for this reason, the social justice issues related to the girls and women who laboured without pay in the laundries remained unaddressed.³⁴ Minimum wages for female laundry employees at this time were around 10 shillings (50 pence) per week for a 15-year-old, rising to 20 shillings (£1) for adult female workers.

The Curtis Report of 1946 found that those working in the convent laundries ‘generally did not even earn pocket money’. As we shall see in the following chapters, there is no clear evidence that pocket money was paid to the GSS laundry workforce in NI until the 1970s, although the daughter of one woman who was placed in St Mary’s, Newry thinks that her now deceased mother might have been paid pocket money in the early 1960s. The GSS maintained consistently that this unpaid labour was necessary for the economic viability of their institutions. As is demonstrated in the testimony of Sister 1 and Sister 2 – two GSS nuns who are cited in the chapters that follow this one about St Mary’s, Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry – the Order’s viewpoint is that the use of free labour was a regrettable and an unavoidable economic necessity that enabled the St Mary’s institutions to provide food and shelter for girls and women without alternative places of safety or support. The fourth vow taken by GSS was that they should not turn away from their door any individual who was in need. Thus, the GSS viewpoint was that their laundries were an economic necessity if the institution was to survive and ‘operate a sanctuary within St Mary’s for women that needed them’.³⁵ They also situate this in the context of nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century poverty, in a time before the welfare state brought greater levels of state support to individuals and families.

Sister 1 first worked in one of the GSS St Mary’s institutions in NI in the late 1960s. She argued that the Order received no state funding for the ‘elder girls’ (older women) and ‘for the ones that came in without social services support’. Sister 2, who also spent a short period working in a GSS St Mary’s institution and its laundry in NI during the 1960s, recalled the women’s work.

“

Yes, they did work in a laundry, so did we. And that was their only source of income, there was no government subsidy for them, so where would we get the money to do that [feed and clothe them], you know? So, like, I know looking back on the laundry story, you know, you kind of wish it was different, but look it was part of the story at the time. It was worldwide, it wasn't just in Ireland, it was worldwide, you know?

However, Sister 1 suggested that a shift in financial arrangements in the early 1970s altered elements of life for the women working in the laundry.

“

...there was reorganisation of Social Services in 1973 under the Seebohm Report³⁶ and...there was more grants given to the Sisters, more money and the Sisters... were able to do more for the girls, so they say. They ran more classes and they [the women in the laundry] were able to go out and get employment then. [The Sisters] had money to pay for the employees that came in.

A further issue that has caused a great deal of discussion is the practice of changing the names of the girls and women sent to the St Mary's institutions. Their admission registers indicate the regular practice of changing the names of new arrivals in the 'penitents' class' (also known as 'the class'). Some of the names that were allocated must have been confusing and distressing for the girls and women whose identities were changed in this way. For example, some 'class names' given to new arrivals to St Mary's, Belfast in 1935–36 were quite common female names such as 'Jane' or 'Philomena', whereas others who arrived in the same year were renamed 'Vincent' and 'Cyprian'.³⁷ The HIAI heard from the GSS that the rationale for this practice of name changing was to protect a girl's or woman's privacy so she would have protection and confidentiality. The individual GSS were also given new names on entering the novitiate. All the GSS were given the name of Mary as well as a specific name, usually a saint or significant event in Church history. However, the act of removing and replacing a person's name caused significant impact on the individual's self-identity and their connection with family and community. This has featured heavily in critiques of the Magdalene laundries that began to reappear in the 1990s.

Further cause for concern arose because a large number of women and girls worked, sometimes for decades, without pay, and that large numbers of women never left these institutions but died there. Drawing on his own research in archives related to the Galway Magdalene Laundry that was operated by the Sisters of Mercy, academic James Smith concluded that this institution was financially profitable.³⁸ Smith's concerns were among numerous criticisms of Ireland's Magdalene laundries that drew international attention. Allegations of abuse within the Magdalene laundries also contributed to the groundswell of opinion in favour of state investigations of these institutions. This included calls for action from international human rights monitoring bodies such as the United Nations Committee against Torture.³⁹ The government of the Republic of Ireland (RoI) responded with the formation of an inter-departmental committee chaired by Martin McAleese, husband of Irish President Mary McAleese, which, in 2013, produced a report into the

state's involvement with the Magdalene laundries which led to a state apology and the establishment of a redress scheme.⁴⁰ The NI government also examined the role of the GSS laundries as children's voluntary homes as part of the HIAI that reported in 2017. That inquiry did not investigate the lives of 'residents' of the St Mary's institutions who were over 18 years old.

2.0 What the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) tells us about the St Mary's laundries in Northern Ireland

The HIAI, chaired by Sir Anthony Hart, submitted its findings in 2017. As part of its much broader remit, the inquiry investigated the experiences of girls (aged under 18) sent to the three GSS convents in NI. It made comments and findings on this. These GSS institutions came under the scrutiny of the HIAI because of the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1950, which introduced an inspection regime for voluntary homes that accommodated children. Inspections were carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The GSS St Mary's institutions were multigenerational establishments, with 'residents' ranging in age from young teenagers up to women in their eighties and nineties, but the 1950 Act directed the inspectors to only consider the conditions under which those under 18 lived and worked. By connecting the state officially to the GSS laundries as institutions within the formal surveillance remit of the Department of Home Affairs, the Act also placed them on the HIAI's list of institutions of interest.

In its conclusions about the accusations the GSS faced about physical abuse of the teenage girls in the laundries, the HIAI ruled that there was 'some justification' to the GSS' claim to be 'enlightened' in this regard. In 1897, the Order issued a direction forbidding its Sisters to strike a child.⁴¹ At this point the GSS referred to all those girls and women working within its laundries as children, making this directive a proscription of corporal punishment for all. In their statements to the HIAI, the GSS reiterated that there was no corporal punishment regime in place in any of their institutions on the island of Ireland. They also pointed out that this was despite the fact that the Children and Young Persons (Voluntary Homes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1952 and 1975 permitted corporal punishment.⁴² Drawing on this statement, the GSS urged the inquiry not to impose twenty-first century standards on institutions which operated many years ago.⁴³ However, the HIAI report noted that the directive of 1897 did not exclude other forms of routinised punishment in the three GSS St Mary's institutions in NI. The HIAI report noted the evidence of witnesses to those forms of punishment. Where relevant, they are cited in the chapters on the three individual St Mary's institutions and laundries, but it is important to acknowledge here that the HIAI concluded that some of the punishments equated to 'a form of deliberate humiliation and amounted to emotional abuse'.⁴⁴

The HIAI also commented on the GSS' flawed policy of placing very young teenage girls alongside much older women in the St Mary's institutions and laundries. The existence of Sacred Heart institutions in Derry/Londonderry (from 1936 to 1952) and in Belfast (from 1922 to 1962) enabled some segregation of teenage girls from women in the St Mary's institutions, but the HIAI concluded that there were examples of school-age girls being put to work in the laundries. The HIAI concluded that the GSS should have refused

to admit children into its institutions. In response to the HIAI, the GSS acknowledged that the variations in the age range of the girls and women were 'not ideal'. The Order indicated that this could be explained partially because of the GSS' commitment that no one in need was to be turned away if they approached the GSS. The GSS suggested that social services and the police were aware of this and came to rely on them as a source of accommodation for girls and women deemed to be in crisis.

In its conclusions concerning the GSS laundries the HIAI identified several 'systemic failures'. These included:

- forcing girls (under 18) to perform industrial work in the Good Shepherd laundries
- punishing St Mary's girls and women for 'misdemeanours in front of others and making the offender kneel, or making an offender stand to eat her meal'
- accepting children under school-leaving age into an 'institution that was not completely child-centred' and failing to ensure that proper care was provided for these children
- failure to put in place a system of monthly visitors.⁴⁵

The Social Work Advisory Group were also responsible for systemic failings. These were:

- failure to carry out inspections of the Good Shepherd institutions
- failure to take steps to ensure that school-age girls were not in Good Shepherd institutions for long periods
- failure to detect the absence of a system of monthly visits to the Good Shepherd institutions.⁴⁶

Discussing the existence of the laundries in the three Northern Irish GSS convents, the HIAI noted that they 'generated a reliable source of income to pay the costs of care in the absence of state maintenance payments prior to the development of the Welfare State, or inadequate maintenance payments following the development of the Welfare State'. The report noted that the laundries' customers included the state. This was the case during World War Two when the St Mary's laundries in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry secured contracts to wash items for the massive influx of military personnel who arrived in NI. The HIAI report stated that 'the Good Shepherd laundry in Londonderry secured the contract for all the military laundry in NI, including that of the Americans at the local naval base'.⁴⁷ This particular statement appears to have been made without recourse to the relevant government files on these contracts. Government files dealing with the matter of laundering the clothes and kit of hundreds of thousands of military personnel reveal that actually the relatively small St Mary's laundries in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry secured a minor proportion of what was clearly a financially lucrative business and one that was very profitable, during World War Two, for the GSS.⁴⁸

While the HIAI condemned the practice of teenage girls working in the laundries, it suggested that a ‘very large proportion’ of ‘each community’ in the laundries were over 18 years of age.⁴⁹ This assessment appears to draw on the limited evidence from Ministry of Home Affairs inspection reports that recorded the presence of relatively small numbers of teenagers. However, the next three chapters discuss the age profiles of girls and women sent to the three St Mary’s institutions, an analysis suggesting that the HIAI underestimated the numbers of teenage girls that spent time in one of these institutions. For example, in the cases where an age is recorded, 45% of those entering St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry were under 18. Based on this discovery, the HIAI criticisms about the teenage girls working in the GSS laundries are more significant than that inquiry recognised.

The HIAI also identified that there were occasions where the working environment of a laundry was clearly not an appropriate residential institution for vulnerable young girls. The HIAI discussed, in detail, the case of three 12-year-old girls admitted to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry after they were the victims of sexual abuse by a group of men in the 1960s. The HIAI wondered why the Juvenile Court had not taken the ‘sensible course’ by sending them to a more appropriate setting (such as a children’s home) and concluded that ‘either the police or the court approached the GSS to take the children because they knew that the Sisters looked after teenagers and unmarried mothers’. This might have made the convent seem ‘the appropriate place to send children who had been exposed to some form of sexual behaviour’. However, the HIAI judged this ‘wholly inappropriate’.



[It was] in no doubt that the Good Shepherd Sisters should have refused to take the children on a permanent basis. By accepting them on a long-term basis, which turned out to be over four years in the case of HIA107, the Good Shepherd Sisters failed to ensure that proper care was provided for these children and that was a systemic failing on their part.

It was cases such as this that fed into another HIAI critique of the GSS.⁵⁰ It outlined how victims of incest or sexual abuse (such as the three young girls discussed above) arrived traumatised, then went through alienating and damaging processes. They had their names changed and had to remain silent during meals while a nun read from religious tracts. Moreover, the GSS ‘discouraged the girls in their care from leaving their premises’, which the HIAI would later describe as ‘a practice of containment’.⁵¹ The HIAI was critical of this ‘poor and outdated practice’, noting that it continued until the late 1960s.⁵² The HIAI also ruled that changing women’s names ‘caused considerable distress and confusion’ to those affected. It ‘considered that the practice continued longer in Londonderry than it should have done and represented poor practice on the part of the Sisters’.⁵³ Its report did note that there were improvements by the late 1960s, which included the provision of educational classes, a recreation room and holidays for the girls (and the women) in the St Mary’s institutions.⁵⁴ This finding should be assessed alongside findings on GSS convents in England that suggest that after the introduction of the Children Act 1948, the Order in England was no longer shielded from ‘the most up-to-date ideas in work for young people’.⁵⁵ The GSS explained to the HIAI that numerous Sisters had begun to take social work qualifications from the 1960s onwards (initially in

England but later at University College Dublin). It is not clear, however, how effective the inspection regime was in NI and how influential it was in encouraging liberalisation of the GSS practices. It was noted earlier that the HIAI was critical of the Department of Home Affairs for failures related to inspections of the GSS institutions.

The HIAI did not explore the role or experiences of adults (over 18) in the St Mary's institutions nor the nature of their entry to them. Nor did it set about an investigation or discussion of the issue of the (unpaid) work that the girls carried out in the laundries. Many of the concerns raised by the HIAI in relation to teenage girls were also relevant to older women in the laundry, many of whom were teenagers when they entered. Some of these women will provide insights in the three chapters that follow this one, which deal with each of the St Mary's institutions and their laundries in NI. However, in advance of those chapters, the current one will discuss research that took place in London in the 1980s and 1990s that provided great insight into the lived experience of some of those long-term 'residents' of two laundries. This chapter will introduce each of the three GSS convents in NI, explain their individual histories and place them within the context of some of the issues discussed so far.

3.0 Magdalene laundries and the long-term impact of institutionalisation

Magdalene laundries re-entered public debate in RoI in the 1990s. Coincidentally, in London, Mary Stuart was at that time working with a number of elderly women who had worked in two recently closed convent laundries. Working with them on art therapy projects over many years enabled her to get some understanding of their lives, most of which had been spent in the convents; many of the women had been there since the 1920s and 1930s. Stuart gained their trust and eventually listened to their 'stories', which she featured in a book which offers valuable insight. In particular, it demonstrated the potential long-term outcomes of early twentieth century concerns about 'moral danger' which were applied to girls and young women.

Stuart's work explains how many of the long-term 'residents' of the two London laundries arrived there. She indicates how the concept of 'moral danger' and notions of 'good' and 'bad' girls impacted fundamentally on the lives of these women. In many cases, she explains this was due to family situations, with fathers being particularly involved in the instances discussed. 'Martha' summarised her experience for Stuart.

“

No one forced me to come here, not like some. I wasn't bad, not like the others. My mother died and I talked it over with my father and he thought it was a good idea, so I agreed. There are worse places to spend your life. My father told me of all the wickedness in the world and said I should stay pure and I wanted to. I wasn't like the others. Those who did the bad thing, you know the types; you never can tell what they'll get up to with men.⁵⁶

Stuart identified several other women who had been placed in the convent by a widowed father. She concluded that ‘these women were daughters whose lives were severely affected by the morality of the time’.⁵⁷ This morality also impacted on other women that Stuart encountered, who would have been labelled ‘bad girls’ in the early twentieth century. ‘Margaret’ described her situation.



I was a bit of a lass, if you know what I mean, a bit bad. I had a baby you know. I grew up in the East End of London. My dad was a sailor. He went all over. I got letters from India and South Africa. He went all over, but when he came back and found out, he sent me to this home. They took the baby away and when I was better the courts sent me here.

Discussing the attractive architecture of the two convents, Stuart suggested that for the parents of these girls and young women ‘the convents must have seemed like a haven for their daughters’. These parents saw only the front entrance and parlour rooms and did not visit ‘the back entrance’, which housed ‘the laundry on one side and the kitchen and the dustbins on the other’. This design ‘hid the labour of the women’.⁵⁸ Stuart identified women from middle-class families who had been placed in the laundry and concluded that it was not only working-class women who were confined by agreement between family members and the nuns.⁵⁹ Moreover, Stuart found evidence that Catholic families, often middle-class ones, placed daughters in the convents in the 1960s and beyond. This was often against the advice of social services.⁶⁰ Among the women that Stuart met and got to know over several years were many who had been ‘placed’ by their families. Fathers were significant actors in the fate of those she met: for example, placing their daughter in the convent following the death of their wife.

Stuart’s book also enriches our understanding of the process of institutionalisation in the context of a convent laundry. Among the issues she discussed was the example of one of the women she met who had tried and failed to leave the convent on at least two occasions. Stuart described how ill-prepared she was for these attempts and for the challenges she faced when entering the world of low-paid employment outside the convent. Stuart also discovered some regret that the convent laundries had closed, because the work within them (even though it was unpaid) had given these women a sense of identity. They associated their labour and the success of the laundry with the economic survival of the convent.

A document from the GSS in Derry/Londonderry describing the transition period in St Mary’s following the closure of the laundry reported similar emotions from some of the women. It described the period after the closure in 1982 as ‘a time of shock, uncertainty and loneliness’ as the ‘laundry had been their way of life for so many years’. It went on to say that the ‘first reaction was one of disappointment’, and that some of the women were heard to say: “What will become of us now that the Laundry is gone”, “How can we keep going without it”, or “How can we stay idle all day”, and “How will we keep warm in the winter?”⁶¹

The impact of the institutions on those women who had spent most of their lives in them was discussed in the inspection reports in the 1990s of the St Mary's 'Senior Group Home' of women who had been in the St Mary's Institution in Belfast. The 1992 report explained that 'by virtue of their situation, this Group has been very institutionalised over the years' and that it was 'a credit to the Good Shepherd Sisters that a more enlightened perspective has been brought to bear which has effected change in both the living conditions and attitudes of this group'.⁶² The inspection the following year drew similar conclusions, that 'to all of these residents the Convent is the only real Home they know and all of them are institutionalised' but that 'great efforts have been made towards normalisation in recent years, but capacities of residents vary'.

The experiences of women who had been in the St Mary's institutions was reflected on by the Good Shepherd Sisters in reviewing their experiences in 2002. Under headings of 'What helped Sisters grow and blossom?' and 'What prevented Sisters from being themselves/what experiences/structures were hurtful?' a number of comments were made about the women in the institutions which reveal that some of the Sisters had reservations about the way in which these women had been treated and their role in this.

The positive statements in the section 'What helped Sisters grow and blossom' included: '[our] efforts to provide variety for ladies'; and 'being part of the great relationship between Sisters and ladies'. More negative comments included: 'being made to suffer when children or ladies became attached to one'; 'the women were treated differently'; 'very hard work in laundry'; 'ingratiating way the ladies had to be with us'; 'women not being given money'; and 'always worrying about people running away'.

There were also a number of comments demonstrating how some Sisters had reflected on the wider system and regretted their role in it. For example, one comment was: 'castigating myself now for not standing up to the system'. Another Sister regretted 'having to use power in a controlling way'.⁶³

4.0 The GSS in Belfast

The GSS established themselves in Belfast in 1867 when they took over a 'Home for Destitute Penitents' that was operated previously by the Sisters of Mercy in the city centre.⁶⁴ The GSS relocated to the Ormeau Road in 1869 where, in addition to a convent, a St Mary's institution with a commercial laundry was built. Newspaper notices in 1869 advertised a bazaar supported by the Bishop of Down and Connor to raise funds for the new 'house of refuge', which was to 'reclaim the disconsolate and friendless fallen female'. The GSS, it said, were 'specially trained to this great work', which was to 'lovingly win back those who have gone astray' and rescue 'many erring souls...for time and eternity'.⁶⁵ In 1880, the Bishop attended a service to dedicate the Church of the Good Shepherd that had been erected in the convent grounds.

The term Magdalene laundry has been applied to the laundries operated by the GSS and other religious orders in Britain and Ireland. However, it was not one that was employed by the GSS or by those who spent any time in any of the laundries. They would have

used terms such as the ‘St Mary’s Home’ or simply the ‘Good Shepherd Convent’. The term Magdalene, however, did feature in newspaper reports of the GSS’ work in Belfast from the foundation of the institution. This term strongly implied that its primary purpose was to ‘reform’ the moral character of women who had ‘fallen’ into ‘vice’. It implied an involvement in sex work but never explicitly stated it. For example, in 1893 a Christmas charity appeal on behalf of the GSS in Belfast alluded to this.

“

[The Sisters] silently and perseveringly do the work of the ministering angels to the fallen, world-weary, and world-deserted daughters of Eve, when their tarnished brows wring with anguish and shame [and as] they carry on their work of reclaiming and reforming the Magdalen in such an unobtrusive manner, there is a danger of their claims to kindly help being forgotten by the charitable public.⁶⁶

However, the historian Maria Luddy has argued that most of the Victorian Magdalene laundries housed ‘unwed mothers’ and other women and girls abandoned by their partners. Those operating these institutions believed it was easier to reform these women than those labelled ‘hardened prostitutes’.⁶⁷

“

The penitent was not treated as an adult and had no control over her life in the refuge. The nuns organised her day and took away all responsibility and decision making...Penitents were trained in deference and subordination in isolated refuges which shielded them from the world, the source of possible temptation. The nuns stressed the importance of personal guilt and that only personal discipline could lead to salvation.⁶⁸

In their aim to ‘reform’ the characters of these women, the GSS routinely allocated new first names to women and girls when they arrived in ‘the class’. As described by historian Frances Finnegan, the GSS practice of assigning new ‘class names’ to ‘penitents’ had the effect of suppressing the woman’s identity as much as it offered her privacy: which was an argument used by the GSS in defence of the system.⁶⁹

Regular collections to support the expenses of the GSS took place in ‘all the churches of Belfast’.⁷⁰ The charitable donations raised financial contributions that were added to the monies being raised by the St Mary’s, Belfast laundry. Newspaper reports suggest that the laundry opened in 1874, at which point a newspaper notice informed readers of its function.

“

The laundry attached to this convent for the purpose of maintaining a large number of Homeless Inmates, who, under the kind care of the nuns are learning to become useful members of society, is now in perfect working order. All kinds of washing executed with neatness and despatch on moderate terms. Residents in Holywood and in the neighbourhood of Belfast can have their Orders punctually attended to, and deliveries made by Convent Van to suit their convenience.⁷¹

A newspaper advertisement placed by the GSS in Belfast, in 1877, suggested that an increase in the number of 'penitents' left them with 'heavy expenses' and they were 'anxious to procure FAMILY and HOTEL WASHING'. Moreover, 'PLAIN NEEDLEWORK and KNITTING are also done by the Inmates.'⁷²

Prior to 1907, there was no government oversight for any of the so-called Magdalene laundries. The Westminster debates about the Factory Acts had heard that conditions were often hot and humid with poor ventilation. It is not known how long the working week was in the St Mary's, Belfast laundry, but it was recorded that 'inmates' in other convent laundries could be required to work for 85 hours per week. As commercial laundries became more mechanised in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, new hazards arose, increasing risk of serious injury, or worse.⁷³ This was illustrated starkly in 1879 when, in a 'fearful accident', a woman working in the St Mary's, Belfast laundry fell into a 'large boiler filled with hot water, when she suddenly lost her footing'. She died shortly afterwards.

By 1880, the number in what one Belfast-based newspaper called 'the penitentiary' was at a steady 'eighty inmates' and this was 'notwithstanding that week after week the most exemplary of them are provided with situations outside under control of the Sisters'.⁷⁴ In 1882, the GSS placed a notice in local newspapers for very different reasons, which was in response to rumours of an outbreak of contagious disease in the convent. The notice denied any case of smallpox infection and included a doctor's statement that 'there is not a case of infectious disease of any kind in the House, nor has there been for six years'.⁷⁵

In June 1899 the Reformatory and Refuge Union⁷⁶ held its annual conference in Belfast. Delegates heard a description of the various institutions in the city that worked for the 'reclamation of fallen women'. One of these was the GSS convent, which was described to the attendees.



[It] holds about 120 women and will accommodate many more when additions now in progress are completed. They have no definite term of detention but rather encourage those women who they fear cannot resist the many temptations outside to remain with them for life.⁷⁷

This indicates that while the GSS was reportedly finding 'situations', or jobs outside the convent, for some of the women and girls who had worked there it also envisaged that for others the St Mary's institution and the work in the laundry was for life. A delegation from the conference made an unannounced visit to the St Mary's laundry and, according to the *Belfast Telegraph*, 'found everything in perfect order'. Up to '150 inmates' were working there during the visit.⁷⁸

By the early 1920s, with political turmoil raging in the city of Belfast, there was a particularly urgent tone to the regular appeals for charitable donations. One appeal highlighted what it said was 'the noble social work in caring for destitute and friendless girls' and it 'would be a pity indeed if any limitation were placed upon its scope, through the circumstances of the time'.⁷⁹ However, only eight months earlier a new architecturally

impressive Good Shepherd Chapel was dedicated at the Belfast convent. The design of the new chapel was praised in newspaper commentary on the service of dedication. It described its 'Gothic' style.



...a nave, a side aisle and transept intended for the accommodation of the penitents who are under the care of the Sisters and a corresponding aisle and transept on the other side, wherein will worship the girls and orphan children who represent yet another charge upon the kindly solicitude and devotion of the Good Shepherd nuns.⁸⁰

The reference to girls and orphan children was in connection to the Sacred Heart Home within the GSS convent in Belfast that accommodated school-age girls. The design of the chapel allowed for the separation of the different categories of women and girls who were sent to the two main institutions on the convent site, the GSS Marianville Mother and Baby Institution, Belfast (which opened in 1950) and the GSS St Mary's institution. The opening of the new chapel came just ten years after the GSS opened a new convent building at the cost of £11,000.⁸¹

The 1920s and 1930s were times of economic hardship in Belfast and its surrounding areas. Many women and girls who entered St Mary's, Belfast during those decades had the term 'no friends' recorded against their name. It was very possibly a reference to their being destitute and homeless as the result of the dire economic circumstances of the period. The interwar economic downturn had severely impacted the city's biggest employer of female workers, the linen industry. At that time, if a woman found herself unemployed and without the safety net of a family network to support her, the only welfare system on offer from the state was 'the workhouse and its attendant outdoor relief'.⁸²

World War Two brought a renewed economic buoyancy to Belfast, the result of wartime industrial demand. The GSS in Belfast also benefited from the upturn in the local economy, securing contracts to launder the clothing, bedding and other items for some of the significant numbers of Allied military personnel that made NI their base.⁸³ Government files dealing with the matter of laundering the clothes and kit of hundreds of thousands of military personnel reveal that the relatively small St Mary's laundries in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry secured a minor proportion of a lucrative business. These files also indicate that visits by state officials to those laundries during the war focused on their ability to meet the need of the war effort. The documents were silent on the fact that the girls and women working there were not receiving a wage for their own contribution to the war effort.⁸⁴ By this point, the number of girls and women working in the St Mary's, Belfast laundry were between 60 and 70.⁸⁵ On the subject of there being no payment for work in their laundries, the GSS argue this should be contextualised in the understanding that girls and women received 'food, shelter and pastoral support'. They also maintain that the alternative for many of those who were accommodated in the St Mary's institutions was homelessness and that St Mary's 'may have been a better solution'. The GSS have stated the following.



[Those entering St Mary's had] no other supports or accommodation and the laundry work provided the income to provide the support. It was also considered to provide training and skills for young women who would find employment on leaving St Mary's.⁸⁶

While the state's wartime surveys focused on the St Mary's Derry/Londonderry laundry's 8,000lbs washing capacity and the technology in place,⁸⁷ those carrying out this technical assessment of the laundry's capabilities were not concerned with questions about the nature of the work that was undertaken in the laundry and remuneration (or lack of it) for that labour or the state's utilisation of the 76 unpaid female labourers. However, trade union representatives did raise this matter, as did employers from the commercial laundry trade. It is likely that their interventions stemmed from the issue of unfair competition rather than any concern for social justice. By 1942 laundries in NI were employing 3,181 people and had an annual turnover of £700,000 (equivalent to about £27.5m today). At a meeting to discuss the wartime organisation of the industry, a representative of the National Union of General Municipal Workers asked 'whether Convent laundry wages were governed by Trade Board Regulations'. If so, he continued, 'such laundries should be asked to observe them'. The reply he received was that 'the kind of labour employed in such laundries was necessarily exclusive and specialised'. A promise was made that the matter would be referred to the Ministry of Labour. There is no record that it ever received any consideration at that point or any other time by government officials at Stormont. As already noted, in 1922 the relevant Trade Board had ruled the workers in convent laundries to be excluded from its authority. At the same meeting where the unions complained about the GSS laundries, a representative of the Laundry Owners' Association claimed that the 'Good Shepherd Convent Laundry in Londonderry had under-cut prices for both civilian and military contracts'.⁸⁸ The next time that any trace of this discussion was to surface was in the *Protestant Telegraph*, the newspaper published by the Rev. Ian Paisley, in 1966. It informed its readers that the 'laundrying requirements of Queen's University Residences are handled by the Good Shepherd Convent Laundry', adding the claim that this 'department of the Church of Rome does not come under proper inspection or trade regulations'.⁸⁹ The laundries should have received visits from factory inspectors, and while no records have been located, Sister 1 did recall being present when inspectors visited.

The Belfast economy during World War Two saw a significant reduction in unemployment. This is likely to have reduced the pool of 'destitute' women from which the GSS laundry had previously replenished its workforce. If this created some problems of labour supply for the GSS, it is one potential explanation for the fact that in 1944 the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal MacRory, wrote to the Ministry of Home Affairs to remind officials of the GSS' well-established mission, which was to 'reclaim, care and train young girls who have fallen or are in peril of falling into evil ways of life'. This appeal is also likely to have been made in the context of the increased concerns about female sexuality given the large influx of American service personnel into NI, best known in the acerbic comment that American servicemen were 'over-sexed, over-paid and over here'.⁹⁰ The GSS were long established as part-time probation officers, something that had been formalised under the Probation of Offenders Act 1907

and affirmed under the Probation Act (Northern Ireland) 1950.⁹¹ In Belfast, both the GSS St Mary's institution and the Salvation Army's Thorndale House were used in this way by the courts.⁹² The GSS St Mary's institution in Derry/Londonderry was employed in a similar fashion. Furthermore, at least one court in RoI also sent girls and women to work in the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry as an alternative to prison, although how this was legally possible is unclear.

In their evidence to the HIAI, the GSS explained that in St Mary's, Belfast, up until the 1960s, the 'ladies slept in dormitories'. At that point, renovations 'divided the sleeping arrangements into smaller, more cosy bedrooms each containing between three or four beds'. Each bedroom 'had its own hand basin/vanity unit and the usual furniture'. In addition, one of the Sisters 'slept on the same floor as the ladies to be "on call" during the night in case someone needed assistance or was feeling unwell'.⁹³

The laundry in Belfast closed in 1977, and St Mary's was registered for 'Persons in Need' and provided living accommodation for 'ladies who still lived with the Good Shepherd Sisters'.⁹⁴ In their statement to the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) researchers in 2018, the GSS explained that the laundry closed as 'the State became more willing to provide funding for the ladies in "care" and the need for the Congregation to maintain an income stream through the laundry dissipated'. By 1980, 'old ladies' in St Mary's were engaged in what the GSS described as 'light work', on behalf of the Northern Candle Company in Belfast.⁹⁵ Close to the former GSS Belfast convent site is the Greenvale Residential Care Home, where it is understood that a very small number of women who once lived and worked in the St Mary's institution reside.

5.0 The GSS in Derry/Londonderry

The GSS arrived in Derry/Londonderry in 1919 and purchased the 'beautifully situated residence' known as Bellevue on the Dungiven Road.⁹⁶ In her testimony for the QUB and UU report Sister 2 outlined the Order's institutional folklore about why they chose to open a convent there. According to the GSS, the Order was drawn to Derry/Londonderry due to concerns among Roman Catholic clerics about female sexuality in a port city where large numbers of military personnel were located as a consequence of World War One. Sister 2 explained.

“

If I remember rightly, 1919 we...we were asked to go to Derry by the local bishop because of the war situation and all the army that were [there] and all the poor girls from the Bogside you know. So that is why they were asked to provide protection for these women.⁹⁷

In 1920, the GSS built and outfitted a laundry at their premises on Derry/Londonderry's Waterside. The cost of construction and installation of machinery for washing, drying and ironing was £15,333, 15 shillings and 4 pence (an investment equivalent to around £600,000 today).⁹⁸ A newspaper advertisement, placed in October 1921 in the *Derry Journal*, indicates that the laundry was operational at the end of that month.

—THE—
NEW LAUNDRY, WATERSIDE
 (Under the Management of the
 Sisters of the Good Shepherd) ...
WILL be ready to begin work on **MONDAY**
 next, 31st inst.
 All who desire to have their Washing
 called for are respectfully requested to notify
 at once as only a limited quantity can be ar-
 ranged for.
 25th October, 1921. 3 R

Advertisement for the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry service published in the *Derry Journal* in October 1921

Influential local Catholic families strongly supported the work of the GSS. Among them was Mrs Frances Lacy Nicholson of Ardmore, on the periphery of the city, whom the GSS noted 'brought many girls to our home'. They recalled that when she 'realised their moral danger', Nicholson 'encouraged them to come to St Mary's class for protection'.⁹⁹ Nicholson was an influential and wealthy local Catholic, described in her obituary, in 1948, as a 'prominent social worker' who 'assisted many organisations, particularly those looking after the poor and the sick'. By the 1940s her son, Mr C.A. Nicholson KC, was a barrister and legal adviser to the Northern Ireland Ministry of Home Affairs.¹⁰⁰

Other members of the local Catholic community were encouraged to help to recoup the cost of the investment in the laundry and the 'large liabilities' that the GSS had 'contracted in connection with their foundation at Bellevue'.¹⁰¹ The Derry Aonach (or Fancy Fair) in 1922 and 1923 raised funds for the convent. Speaking about the work of the GSS in 1923, the Bishop of Derry, Charles McHugh, said: 'it was not possible to withhold admiration for their wonderful spirit of charity in keeping those who were friendless and wayward from falling into sin and raising up and placing them in the friendship of God'. The Bishop described a visit he had made to the convent, to celebrate an early morning Mass, where he was impressed by the devotion of the 150 'penitents' who attended. He noted the significant expenses the GSS incurred 'in order to establish an industry for the employment of the inmates and to help in maintaining the institution'.¹⁰²

Fundraising activities by the GSS were a matter of interest to the local newspapers throughout the 1920s. These included concerts, such as one held in the Literary Institute, Letterkenny, Co Donegal in February 1926.¹⁰³ In March 1926 a 'monster whist drive' was held at the City Café in Derry/Londonderry 'towards the advancement of that splendid institution – the Good Shepherd Convent, Waterside'.¹⁰⁴ In June 1926 a Grand Gala with Fancy Dress Parade and 'House to House collection' was held.¹⁰⁵ In 1926 the Board of Guardians donated one tonne of coal to the GSS convent, a donation which represented the equivalent of a state subsidy for the institution. The coal may have helped power the laundry as well as heat those living in the institution.¹⁰⁶ In February 1929, and annually

for several years, an evening of entertainment was held with the musical items performed by the women and girls in St Mary's. In 1929 this involved 'a very enjoyable programme of songs, Irish and Dutch dances and dramatic items'. A *Derry Journal* report on the event explained 'these were contributed in a finished manner by a number of the girls of the institution, who evinced very careful training'. The newspaper's readers were assured that the 'girls' theatrical efforts did 'not interfere with their regular labour'.¹⁰⁷ In February 1930, a comic opera featured at least 30 'inmates', and a series of speakers thanked the GSS and praised its entertainment as the 'last hold out in Derry against the mechanised productions of Hollywood'.¹⁰⁸ In February 1932 the St Mary's hall was 'tastefully decorated' and the operetta *The Princess of Poppyland* was performed by the 'girls', who it was noted, 'reflected great credit on their musical teachers'.¹⁰⁹

There are no mentions in the newspapers of further musical productions until the early 1960s when the *Derry Journal* featured a photograph of the 'Principals in the presentation by the girls of St Mary's Good Shepherd Convent' of *HMS Pinafore*.¹¹⁰ In June 1963 there was a photograph of the cast of *The Maid of the Mountains*, which had been 'chosen by the girls of St Mary's...for their annual musical production'.¹¹¹

In 1980 and 1981, BBC Radio Ulster broadcast services from the Good Shepherd Convent Chapel in Derry/Londonderry. Built in 1958, it had 'accommodation for 200 in the girls' chapel' and was opened by the Bishop of Derry, Dr Farren. Visits from the Bishop of Derry were a feature throughout the history of the convent. Bishop Edward Daly preached at a Mass held there in 1975 for the Catholic Nurses Guild. Taking up the theme of 'questionable medical ethics', the Bishop opined that Catholics needed to take a stance against abortion and sterilisation.¹¹² Nine years later, during a Mass in the same location on the tenth anniversary of the diocese's Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, he offered another sermon on the 'danger of more liberal and permissive values'.¹¹³

The GSS convent in Derry/Londonderry appears to have engaged more with the local community than the other St Mary's institutions in Belfast or Newry. A range of events are recorded as being held in the Derry/Londonderry convent, including the establishment of a Diocesan History Society in 1976, a Marriage Encounter Renewal night in 1980 and a Legion of Mary Congress in 1982.¹¹⁴ Monthly meetings of the Catholic Alliance of Faith, Intercession and Evangelism were held in the convent through 1986 and 1987 as well as a flower arranging class in November 1987.¹¹⁵ The convent's chapel was also the venue for the annual adopters' Mass.¹¹⁶

The St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry advertised its services throughout its period of operation. The language used in the advertising represented new marketing approaches and perhaps a rebranding of the language used by the GSS in explaining their own mission. In August 1968, an advertisement for the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry service told potential customers that the work was carried out in its 're-education centre'.¹¹⁷ This was certainly a shift from the references to 'inmates' and 'penitents' that had been a feature of the language used about those working in the laundry in nineteenth century Belfast or early twentieth century Derry/Londonderry. However, the term 'the class' was still used in internal GSS records in the late 1960s. The GSS support the view that the term 'penitent' had ceased by the late 1960s. Their perspective is that the St Mary's institutions had 'a wider remit' by that point and that there was 'no element of "penance" associated with entry'.¹¹⁸



Advertisement for the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry service, published in August 1968

In June 1982 there was a new advertising jingle¹¹⁹ but it must have had limited success as 'the oldest laundry in Derry' closed its doors in November 1982.¹²⁰ Others were also closing, no doubt as domestic washing machines became more widely available.



Advertising jingle for the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry laundry service published in the *Derry Journal* in June 1982

The *Ulster Herald* explained that the Derry/Londonderry laundry's closure came after all 'the other commercial laundries in the city had closed down' and that at this point 'the Good Shepherd laundry employed about 15 people'. It is not clear if this was a reference to paid workers or the number of girls and women living within the St Mary's institution whose free labour enabled the laundry to survive until that point. By November 1984

Glendermott Enterprises was advertising as operating out of '50 Dungiven Road (former Good Shepherd laundry)'.¹²¹

While the laundry closed in 1982, St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry continued to operate with several new women arriving following the closure of St Mary's, Newry in 1984. In the 1990s the GSS in Derry/Londonderry sold some of the convent land and buildings for housing development. The Sister in Charge spoke in 1999 of her 'sadness at seeing most of the buildings located here since 1919 demolished to make way for a housing development'. The remaining nuns were living in two houses on a 'small part of the Good Shepherd estate'. Neither the property developer nor the GSS commented on the financial value of the land.¹²²

In 1994, Daleview House and Beechway House (run by North and West Housing Initiative) opened on the convent grounds. Daleview had '16 purpose built bedsits for the elderly' on the 'grounds of the Good Shepherd Convent...where most of the residents have lived previously'. Beechway was built to cater 'for the needs of people with learning difficulties' and in 2015 it was described as offering 'comfortable and homely accommodation in the community to 16 residents, some of whom had spent most of their life living and working in convent settings'.¹²³ The accommodation was operated by a housing association and social workers began to come in to work with the women.

Additional information recorded about the GSS convent in Derry/Londonderry in the HIAI report includes the information that the Sacred Heart Home for school-age girls operated from 1936 to 1952. The Bellevue Hostel opened to cater for teenage girls in 1974 and closed in 1984. These were teenagers placed with the GSS under Place of Safety Orders or Fit Person Orders. However, the Bellevue Hostel appears to have been underused, to the extent that the GSS began renting some rooms to student nurses working at the nearby Altnagelvin Hospital. The HIAI noted the laundry was 'mechanised' in the early 1960s. The HIAI also surveyed the issue of official inspections of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. While some inspections did take place, very few inspection reports have survived. Inspections were the responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs until the 1970s when they became the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services Social Work Advisory Group. It is evident that they did not carry out inspections until the late 1970s, something which led to criticism by the HIAI.¹²⁴

6.0 The GSS in Newry

The third convent was established by the GSS on the Armagh Road in Newry in 1946, but it does not appear to have housed any girls or women until the following year. It was the smallest of the three GSS St Mary's institutions in NI, housing around 30 girls and women at any one time with a maximum capacity of 36. It registered as a voluntary children's home in 1951 and operated alongside the GSS Marianvale Mother and Baby Institution, Newry. There was a small farm and garden on the site. From 1973, there was also a hostel for female victims of domestic violence.¹²⁵ In 1984 the GSS sold the site and it became a community centre for people dealing with alcohol dependency, operated by the Mercy Sisters.¹²⁶ The GSS told the HIAI that at the point of closure, St Mary's housed around 19 women who were mainly aged over 55.¹²⁷ A number of those women were then transferred to the GSS convent in Derry/Londonderry.

Initially, living accommodation in Newry was in four prefabricated huts. Two were dormitories, one contained the kitchen, and the final hut housed the dining room. In the 1960s, a new building opened and, a few years later, was renovated to provide modernised sleeping and living quarters. Although Marianvale was on the same site, interaction between its 'residents' and those of St Mary's was forbidden. The exception to this was Mass in the convent chapel, but rigid segregation was enforced as was explained by Bernadette Ross, in her testimony to the Independent Panel. She was sent by a court in 1972, aged 14, to St Mary's, Newry.

“

...when we went to Mass we went in first, the children went in first and the older people and then...the mothers [from Marianvale] would come up, and they would sit in the rows behind us, and then the nuns sat behind them.

Unlike the St Mary's institutions in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, Newry never had a Sacred Heart Home that was designed to accommodate teenage girls and segregate them from the older women. The GSS told the HIAI that school-age girls were generally not placed in Newry and there does appear to have been an attempt to minimise their numbers. This appears to have been because it was more difficult to arrange school placements at Newry than it was at the Belfast and Derry/Londonderry St Mary's institutions. However, as the chapter on St Mary's, Newry and its laundry reveals it was still used to accommodate many traumatised young teenage girls during its existence.

Chapter 2

The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's
Institution and Laundry, Belfast



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** Sources used in writing this chapter
- 2.0** Historical background to St Mary's, Belfast
- 3.0** What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Belfast
- 4.0** How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast
- 5.0** How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Belfast
- 6.0** Women who never left St Mary's, Belfast
- 7.0** What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast
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- 16.0** Conclusion
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Readers' advisory

Readers of this chapter are reminded that when quoting from historical records, newspaper reports and other contemporary sources, it is necessary to use the terminology and language that was used at the time. The Panel is aware that such terms can be upsetting and unacceptable and that they would not be used today. These terms are used as little as possible in all the chapters of this report but may appear in quoted sections. It is important to make the point that institutional records and reports are reflective of the creator's viewpoint and should not be considered conclusive nor definitive of the practices and processes of the institution. Nor should they be considered to be evidential or impartial in relation to the institutions themselves or the girls and women who were admitted to them. This report discusses issues that readers will find upsetting. These include subjects such as incest, rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, family separation and poor mental health.

In terms of testimonies, when speaking about their personal history, some individuals quote the terms that were derogatorily used about them or their children in the past. We will quote these terms as they appear in the testimonies cited.

The written records relating to GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Belfast present a partial account of the institution, how it was run, and the lives of the girls and women who stayed there. The lack of detail captured in short case notes on the individual girls and women who entered the institution leaves numerous questions either partially answered or not addressed at all. This is particularly true in terms of the emotional inner lives and family details of the pregnant girls and women who entered the institution. Recording testimonies from some of those women takes us beyond the brevity and formulaic information that is offered in the archival sources. At times, the testimonies offer very contrasting perspectives on the nature and functions of this institution to those suggested by written records.

1.0 Sources used in writing this chapter

The GSS made available to the Independent Panel (IP) admissions material in relation to St Mary's, Belfast. This was:

- one admission register (1890–1969)
- one register of the Sacred Heart Home that contained details of further admissions to St Mary's, Belfast.¹

In February 2026, as the Report was being prepared for design and printing, the GSS located some further historical files. These included admissions records for 1922–33 which it was assumed had been lost. The Panel had very limited time to examine these records and, as a result, they are discussed in an addendum at the end of this chapter.

Testimony has been taken from three main sources:

- the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) (2015–17)²
- testimony collected in 2018–19 for the Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) report of 2021³
- testimony collected between 2024 and 2025 by the Panel.

2.0 Historical background to St Mary’s, Belfast

The historical background to all three GSS St Mary’s institutions in Northern Ireland (NI) is detailed in the chapter ‘The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary’s Institution and Laundries: The Background’.

The GSS arrived in Belfast in 1867, taking over a ‘Home for Destitute Penitents’ from the Sisters of Mercy in the city centre.⁴ They moved to premises on the Ormeau Road in 1868 where a convent, a church and the St Mary’s institution with laundry facilities were built. The laundry closed in 1977. At that time, the St Mary’s institution was registered for ‘Persons in Need’ and cared for ‘ladies who still lived with the Good Shepherd Sisters’.⁵ By 1980, ‘old ladies’ in the St Mary’s institution were engaged in ‘light work’ provided by the Northern Candle Company in Belfast.⁶ The last admissions to this St Mary’s institution were in 1984. The St Mary’s Home Senior Group was based in the main convent building until 1996 when the women moved into sheltered accommodation or Greenvale Residential Home, built on a site adjacent to where the St Mary’s institution once stood.

On a site to the rear of the St Mary’s institution was the GSS Marianville Mother and Baby Institution, Belfast (1950–90), Sacred Heart Children’s Home (1922–62), Roseville Hostel (1967–75) and an adolescent centre (1970–82).



Convent of the Good Shepherd Marianville, Ormeau Road, Belfast (1990), photo T.2418/1/231, used with permission of the Deputy Keeper, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (All that remains of the laundry is the chimney, which is now to the rear of apartments constructed on that part of the site.)

3.0 What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Belfast

The GSS made available a limited set of financial records for this institution for the QUB and UU 2021 report. These records only related to 1966–68 and itemise payments to the GSS. These appear to be for laundry services, but as there are references to individuals and to various local welfare authorities they must also include donations and payments to the GSS for girls and women sent to the institution by arrangement with various local welfare committees. They included payments from a range of hotels in Belfast such as the Russell Court, the International and Robinson's, which were often the largest amounts of money being paid. Cafés and restaurants that sent their laundry to the Good Shepherd Convent included the Carlton and the Abercorn. They were joined by other businesses, such as the Anderson and McAuley department store. Local schools that were among the customers included Dominican College and St Patrick's Boys School; they were joined by two higher educational establishments, QUB and St Mary's Training College. A range of religious orders, such as the Redemptorist Fathers, Bon Secours Sisters and Sisters of Nazareth, also had their laundry services carried out at the GSS Convent in Belfast. Two well-known social establishments on the customer list were Belvoir Park Golf Club and the Ulster Club.

Several individuals are also recorded to have made financial donations or payment for work carried out in the GSS laundry. There appears to have been an income of around £22,283 for 1967 and £21,950 for 1968. However, with no record of expenditure, it is impossible to assess the laundry's contribution to the financial health of the GSS

Convent in Belfast. The financial records available do not provide the necessary detail, scale, scope or chronological sequencing through which to offer a precise determination about profits or losses at the laundry. There is also no trace of the extent to which the GSS Convent had financial reserves on which it could draw.

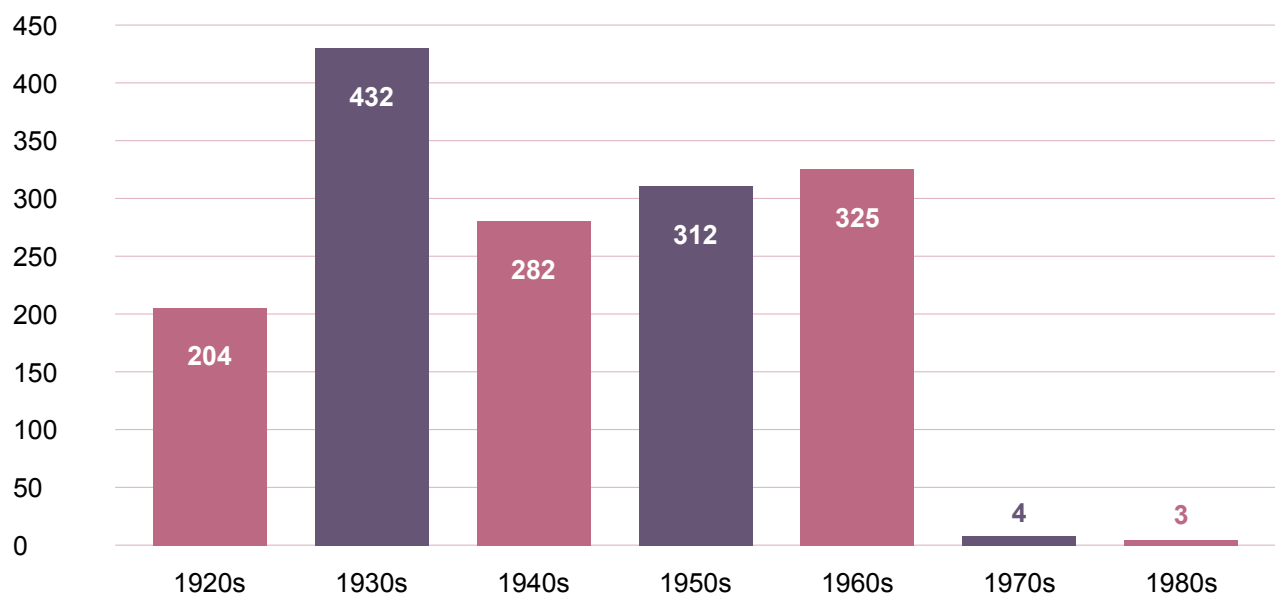
The payments from welfare authorities were presumably for maintenance for some of the girls and women in St Mary's, Belfast. The available records for the 1960s record payments from the Belfast, Antrim, Armagh, Down and Fermanagh Welfare Committees. There are several payments recorded as 'Special Care Management', which were presumably for girls or women in the St Mary's institution. The Special Care Committee was established following the Mental Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1948 and had responsibility for overseeing the care of those described in the language of the time as 'mentally subnormal'. There were also payments made by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Pensions; the latter were presumably for the older women in the institution. When a girl or woman was committed to the institution by a court under, for example, a Place of Safety Order, her local welfare committee authority was responsible for paying the GSS for her maintenance. When someone arrived to work in the laundry from a criminal court having been sent as an alternative to prison or on a probation order, the necessary financial arrangements would have been via the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Individual families also made payments towards the upkeep of a relative in St Mary's, Belfast. For example, in 1952, records held by the Ministry of Home Affairs about a 13-year-old girl who was committed to the care of the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast until she was 18, under a 'Fit Person Committal to Care or Protection Order', noted that her father had to pay Antrim County Council 7 shillings per week. The Council was then to forward this to the GSS.⁷

4.0 How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

As shown in **Figure 1**, the numbers of girls and women sent to St Mary's, Belfast reached a highpoint in the 1930s before a clear decline after the 1960s, with only four women admitted in the 1970s. The laundry closed in 1977, but there were still a small number of admissions to St Mary's, Belfast in the next few years.

Figure 1: Number of girls and women who were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast per decade, 1922–84⁸

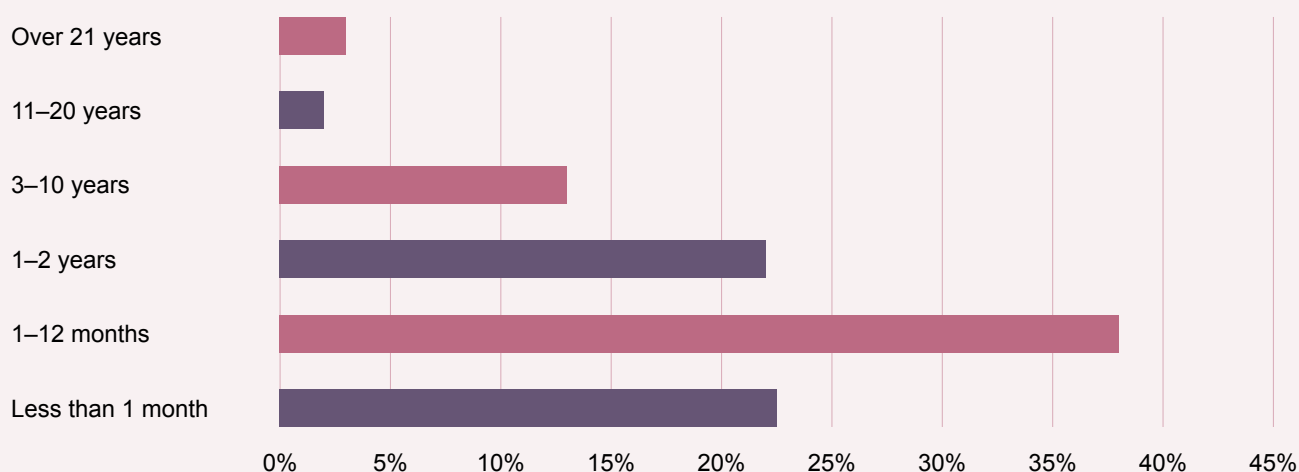


5.0 How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Belfast

There are some difficulties in assessing the length of stay in this St Mary's institution as 498 girls and women have no leaving date recorded against their name. In addition, there are 153 girls and women who had multiple entrances and exits which make it complex to calculate a total length of stay in the institution. The information recording multiple exits could also be limited; in nine cases it simply stated: 'in and out several times'. On the notes for a 15-year-old girl who was admitted in 1943 is recorded: 'this child expelled many times'. The child was then readmitted over a seven-year period. A 17-year-old girl who was admitted in the 1950s was 'sent to Newry' (the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Newry) at one point before returning to Belfast five months later from where she was then 'sent home'. She came back to St Mary's, Belfast three months after that, before running away two weeks later.

The data on the length of stay shown in **Figure 2** has been calculated using information for the 756 girls and women where a date of departure was recorded (this excludes those with multiple entrances and exits recorded against their name).

Figure 2: Length of time girls and women stayed in St Mary's, Belfast



	Less than 1 month	1–12 months	1–2 years	3–10 years	11–20 years	Over 21 years
No. of girls and women	169	287	166	98	13	23
%	22.4	38.0	22.0	13.0	1.7	3.0

Twenty-three girls and women (3.0%) remained for over 21 years. These included a woman who was admitted when she was 14, in 1935, who left the institution in 1967 to work as a domestic in a nursing home. Another woman, who was 28 years old when she was admitted in 1937, was recorded as having died in 1982 at 73 years old. The longest recorded stay was for a woman admitted in 1925 who died in 1984, having been in St Mary's, Belfast for 59 years.

6.0 Women who never left St Mary's, Belfast

Among those who did not leave St Mary's, Belfast, staying for the rest of their lives, were the 'consecrated penitents'. Their position in the hierarchy of the Good Shepherd convents is explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries. These particular women also appear below in some of the testimonies on Belfast where they are referred to as 'the Magdalens'. The numbers recorded as having formalised their stay in this way in St Mary's, Belfast differ from those recorded for the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Derry/Londonderry in that they are much lower. For example, two women were recorded as becoming a 'Child of Mary' and two as being 'auxiliaries', and four women were recorded as being a 'consecrated penitent' in 1940. In total, ten women were recorded as going to the 'Magdalens'. The latter was a reference to the Magdalen Sisters, who lived a separate life of 'contemplation' in their own accommodation in the GSS Belfast convent. They were later known as the Sisters

of the Cross and more recently as the Contemplative Sisters of the Good Shepherd.⁹ The GSS observe that they also included some women who had no connection with the St Mary's institution.¹⁰

The records sometimes offer brief details about those who were recorded as considering making a lifetime commitment to remain in the GSS Convent. Two women were recorded as having come from Marianville and the GSS Marianvale Mother and Baby Institution, Newry and who 'wanted to enter religious orders'. For one woman admitted in the 1960s, the notes stated that 'at first she was hot tempered but overcame it very well' and then entered the Sisters of the Cross. Two years later the situation was rather different for a 19-year-old who had come from Marianvale, as her notes recorded 'the intentions of entering the Sisters of the Cross'. However, the GSS 'did not think her by any means suitable. She is a peculiar character. She has a jealous and suspicious disposition'. The notes recorded that 'when she was told she would not be suitable for the life she asked Welfare to get her a job'. She left St Mary's, Belfast after seven months, and – after a period in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry and then Gransha Hospital – got a job in Belfast.

Other women spent most of their lives in St Mary's, Belfast remaining as residents of the St Mary's Senior Group Home and then moving to either the sheltered accommodation or Greenvale Residential Home on the convent site. For two women, their date of death was added after the closure of St Mary's, Belfast without any additional information that they had left to go anywhere else. One woman admitted to St Mary's, Belfast in 1926, aged 17, had a date of death recorded in 1990. A second woman, who was admitted in 1933, died in 2007 according to the GSS records.

Evidence from testimonies represented a wide range of experiences in terms of length of stay. 20240909EB explained that his sister was sent there in the 1950s. He has now traced the daughter and son that his sister gave birth to in the 1950s and understands that this lay behind his father's decision to send his sister to this St Mary's institution. She was in her thirties at this point and remained there (and in Greenvale) until her death over four decades later.

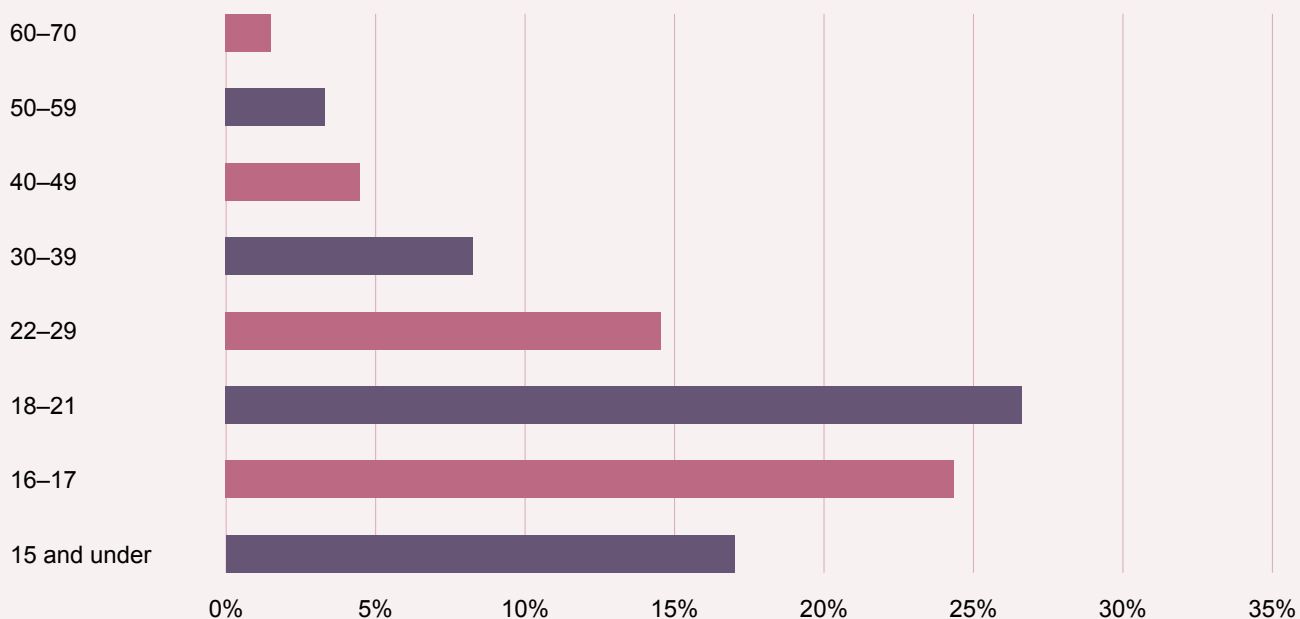
Others spent shorter periods working in the laundry. The mother of four sons, who all gave testimony to the Panel (20240524TU, 20240913OG, 20240620TR and 20250625MR) have learnt that their birth mother was in her mid-twenties when she was sent from Marianville to St Mary's, Belfast where she worked in its laundry in the 1960s. She remained there for 13 months.

7.0 What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

The ages of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast are presented in **Figure 3**. The ages of those who entered St Mary's ranged from a nine-year-old girl to a 70-year-old pensioner. The nine-year-old girl was admitted in the 1940s. Her notes say that she was sent by the court, but we have no further information about this. It is assumed that she was placed in the Sacred Heart Home, which accommodated children of school age.

They left the institution each day to attend a local school. This girl left the institution five years later and then returned 12 months after that. She then remained for the next 13 years, presumably working in the St Mary's institution laundry. After her departure the notes record that she got married in England in the mid-1960s. The 70-year-old woman was admitted in 1957 but there is no further information recorded about why she was admitted or when she left.

Figure 3: Age of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast



	15 and under	16-17	18-21	22-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-70
No. of girls and women	223	321	352	193	108	60	43	20
%	16.9	24.3	26.7	14.6	8.2	4.5	3.3	1.5

As girls under 18 were among the population of laundry workers, the institution came under a new form of inspection in 1950 because it was registered as a 'voluntary children's home', under the name 'The Good Shepherd Girl's home', along with Marianville and the Sacred Heart Home.¹¹ The HIAI suggested that the number of girls under 18 who were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast was ten in 1964, six in 1965, 16 in 1966 and 13 in 1967.¹² It also suggested that 'the great majority who lived and worked in St Mary's [Belfast] were over eighteen'.¹³ However, the registers for St Mary's, Belfast record 29 girls under 18 admitted in 1964, 18 in 1965, 17 in 1966 and 18 in 1967, with, as noted above, 41.2% of all admissions being under 18 years of age. This is a number significantly larger than the HIAI assumed and, as it noted, it was inappropriate for girls under 18 to be placed in a St Mary's institution and unacceptable for them to carry out

industrial work in a GSS laundry.¹⁴ It is assumed that any of these girls who were under 15 would have been placed in the Sacred Heart Home and sent out to school each day and that those who had reached the school-leaving age of 15 would have been required to work in the St Mary's, Belfast laundry. The GSS perspective is that they did this in return for the 'food, shelter and pastoral support' that they received.¹⁵

8.0 Where did girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast come from

There were 210 girls and women for whom an address was not recorded. The home addresses of the girls and women for whom an address was recorded are set out in **Table 1**. Of those where addresses were recorded, the largest proportion of girls and women were from Belfast, with the overall majority from NI. Of the 14.5% who were from the Republic of Ireland (RoI), these girls and women were most often admitted in the 1940s and 1950s.

Table 1: Address of girls and women before they were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

Location	No.	Percentage
Belfast	409	34.2
Republic of Ireland	173	14.5
Co Down	168	14.0
Co Tyrone	91	7.6
Co Antrim	90	7.5
Co Armagh	74	6.2
Derry/Londonderry city	53	4.4
England	41	3.4
Co Fermanagh	38	3.2
Co Derry/Londonderry	38	3.2
Scotland	17	1.4
Australia	2	0.2
USA	2	0.2
South Africa	1	0.1

9.0 What was the religious background of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

The majority of those admitted to St Mary's, Belfast were Catholic. Fifteen girls and women were recorded as Protestants with six others having a parent recorded as a Protestant. On four occasions, it was recorded that a religious conversion had taken place. These included a 15-year-old girl who was admitted in 1941, and who remained in St Mary's for 12 years. She was confirmed a month after she arrived, received first communion the following year and was 'received into the Church'. She was eventually recorded as leaving for New Zealand. A 19-year-old Protestant was admitted in the 1940s and remained in the institution for five years, during which time she was 'received into the Church'. Another 19-year-old who was admitted in the 1950s was also 'received into the Church'. She left after four years to take up some unspecified type of employment and then returned six months later. There is no final leaving date recorded against her name.

10.0 Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast?

The records noted who 'referred' (the term used to indicate who arranged a girl or woman's entry) 637 of the girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast. This number is less than half of those admitted to the institution. There is also very little detail recorded about the circumstances around admissions other than for 1963–68, where a separate register has additional details around admissions in those years. **Table 2** provides a breakdown of the referral sources for the 637 girls and women who were referred to St Mary's, Belfast.

The high number of girls and women who were sent by the courts highlights the role of St Mary's, Belfast as an alternative for prison, a place of probation and also as an institution used as a 'place of safety' by the court and welfare systems. The role of the courts is discussed below.

Table 2: Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast

Source	No.	Percentage
Court	189	29.7
Religious orders (excluding GSS)	84	13.2
Marianville	61	9.6
Social services/welfare	55	8.6
Legion of Mary	44	6.9
Clergy	33	5.2
Police	33	5.2
Self-referral	32	5.0
GSS	31	4.9
Family	20	3.1
Sacred Heart Home	17	2.7
Hospital	11	1.7
Middletown Training School	8	1.3
Named nun	8	1.3
Marianvale	3	0.5
Probation officer	2	0.3
Prison	2	0.3
Doctor/solicitor	2	0.3
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children	2	0.3

11.0 What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

The admissions registers for St Mary's, Belfast generally offer brief details about how and why girls and women were sent to the institution. For some reason, between 1963 and 1969 more detail was recorded. It is assumed that a different nun was carrying out this task during these years and that she had more of an interest in detail. For this reason, many of the examples discussed below are drawn from the more expansive records of 213 girls and women admitted between 1963 and 1969.

Over the period in which St Mary's, Belfast operated that is covered by this report (1922–84) girls and women were admitted for a range of reasons. In a statement provided in 2018 for the QUB and UU research, the GSS outlined the Order's 'mantra': that 'nobody in need would be turned away'. They provided a list of 'the most common reasons for an admission', which were:

1. domestic violence
2. homelessness and lack of family support (e.g., former care home children)
3. vulnerability – girls described in that era as being in 'moral danger' or registered as 'special care'
4. former 'residents' of the mother and baby institution who were vulnerable and for whom no alternative placements were available
5. Legion of Mary.

The GSS statement added that the facilities they offered 'were well known throughout society and statutory agencies'. Among those making 'referrals' were 'GPs, Social Services and Parish Priests'. They also maintained that some women 'simply turned up on the doors of the Convent seeking refuge and assistance'.¹⁶

An analysis of the records suggests that some of these factors are more evident than others. For example, there are no references to domestic violence in the registers, though there were 14 women whose husbands were recorded as still living at the address which the women had come from. Moreover, as has been remarked throughout this report, the institutional records do not usually provide a great amount of detail on any individual.

The GSS did use the term 'no friends' in the brief notes on 83 girls and women who had no address. Most occasions where the term was used were in the 1930s and this may have reflected the dire economic situation in interwar Belfast. The city's staple industries were in decline, including the linen industry, which employed large numbers of the city's female workers. If these women were destitute, they faced extremely limited options. If they had no family to support them, 'the dominant welfare system...remained the workhouse and its attendant outdoor relief'.¹⁷ In the period before the establishment of the welfare state, women who had no family or other support network were vulnerable to homelessness and admittance to an institution such as St Mary's, Belfast was one of their limited options.

11.1 Girls and women who had been pregnant outside of marriage and were sent to St Mary's, Belfast

Girls and women who had a baby outside of marriage were also at risk of being left without a family support network and this was a factor in some admissions to St Mary's, Belfast. As will be discussed shortly, in a number of testimonies it was suggested that there was a punitive element to their placement in the institution. In these instances, the institution is believed to have continued the role it had performed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whereby girls and young women who were judged to have 'fallen' from the moral codes set down in Christian ideology were taken into 'the penitents' class' for a period of reflection and reform. These girls and women were often considered to be in 'moral danger' and the St Mary's institution was seen as a place of safety in this regard. It is in this context that the institution appears to have been used for victims-survivors of rape and incest. Those involved in decision-making included priests, parents of young birth mothers and social workers.

The records of Marianville that are discussed in the chapter dealing with that institution noted at least 65 girls and women being sent to 'the class' in St Mary's, Belfast. The St Mary's records showed slightly less at 61 and also recorded the admittance of three women from Marianvale in Newry and Mater Dei Hostel in Belfast.

There were a variety of reasons that led to girls and women moving from a mother and baby institution to St Mary's, Belfast. In seven cases, teenage girls who were victims of incest were admitted to St Mary's from Marianville, with three of these girls admitted via court orders. Other women who were admitted from Marianville under court orders included a young woman admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) who was on probation for two years, apparently for running away to get married. She remained for nine months in St Mary's, Belfast. Again in the 1960s (exact year redacted), a young woman was 'committed by the court for twelve months'. She entered St Mary's, Belfast three weeks after her baby was born and stayed for ten months.

In three instances, it was recorded that parents requested that a daughter go to St Mary's, Belfast after they had been in Marianville and had given birth. These included a 19-year-old admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) who was described as having been 'sent by her parents' who thought she 'needed some training before returning home'. It is unclear how long she spent in St Mary's, Belfast.

The more detailed admissions records for 1963–69 enable us to see that eight admissions from Marianville during those years were described as 'voluntary'. As Mairead Enright has recently argued, this term often meant that the girl or woman concerned had been sent without state funding or involvement and that they 'almost always found themselves in a Good Shepherd institution because of someone else's decision'.¹⁸ The eight admissions included a 20-year-old whose baby was 'born in a field beside her house'. When she was transferred to St Mary's, Belfast, the baby went to St Joseph's Babies' Home, Belfast. The notes on this young woman described her as a 'splendid worker but highly strung and difficult to get on with'. She worked in the laundry for just over a year before her departure was noted.

The more detailed notes that exist for 1963–69 offer commentary on girls and women that can be read in two ways. They offer evidence of the personal history and personality of the individuals concerned. They also provide insight on how the GSS viewed girls and women in terms of factors such as their perceived intelligence or their responses to the rules and routine of the institution.

Two women admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) from Marianville were described as ‘unstable’. One of them was described as having ‘not much sense of responsibility’ but having also ‘made a good effort to improve while here’. The other, a 24-year-old, was described as a ‘moody character’ who ‘seemed to have a low IQ’.

An 18-year-old, who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted), was described as ‘an unusual character’ and ‘not a good influence on the girls’. A 16-year-old girl who was admitted in the same year was also described as being ‘not a good influence amongst the girls’. Another woman, admitted in 1964, was described as having ‘very little intelligence’ and being ‘very untruthful’. A 21-year-old admitted in a different year in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was described more positively as a ‘quiet girl, never gave any trouble’. Given the situations that these girls and women found themselves in, elements of ‘moody’ behaviour were probably unsurprising.

With the GSS records offering the perspective of the institution, rather than of the girls and women who were sent to it, an alternative source is required to provide insights on the lived experience of those girls and women. Testimony provides an opportunity to achieve that.

11.2 What testimonies from birth mothers or their families tell us about girls and women who had been pregnant outside of marriage and were sent to St Mary’s, Belfast

The testimonies recorded with birth mothers (or their family members) who were transferred from Marianville to St Mary’s, Belfast offer an alternative source, and perspective, on how and why a decision was made to send them to work in the St Mary’s institution. In the 1960s, 20250527BG was sent to Marianville by the welfare committee in her local town. She explained that she did not know anything about where she was going at the time. The participant explained the factors that led to her baby’s adoption.



I was only 17 and a half, 18 at that time, very naive as to what was happening, but was told I couldn’t keep the baby because I had no accommodation. Mum and Dad were living but she had her own problems, so that’s why that didn’t take place.

She stayed in Marianville until the birth of her daughter and was then transferred to the St Mary’s institution. She remained there for three years.

20240904BL's birth mother had a son in the mid-1950s who was placed in care. Four years later, this birth mother gave birth to 20240904BL. On both occasions the birth mother, who was in her thirties at this time, was sent to Marianvale by her father, who was a widower. 20240904BL described her mother's situation after the first birth.

“

[My birth mother] then obviously she was allowed out home, I don't know where, what the situation was her home, but she was allowed home.

20240904BL has met her uncle, who had some disturbing information for her about her conception.

“

[My birth mother had] told him in later years that she was walking home one Sunday night and somebody came out, it was up a country lane, out in [place name] and she told him she was raped.

After 20240904BL was born, her birth mother was moved to St Mary's, Belfast and she remained there until it was closed in 1984. At that point, she was moved to sheltered residential accommodation built adjacent to the site of the laundry. In total, she lived on the Ormeau Road site for almost 40 years. 20240904BL explained what she knows about her birth mother's life there.

“

...all them years, and she worked, I think she started off working in the laundry. And [when it closed] then they had little bungalows where she maybe shared the bungalow with another female and they were gardening and all, then.

20240904BL's birth mother died in the late 1990s and the occupational details on her death certificate read: 'laundress, convent, retired'. This was the case on the vast majority of death certificates for the elderly women who died either while still in one of the GSS St Mary's institutions or in one of the residential institutions they were transferred to in the 1980s and 1990s.

Four brothers (20240524TU, 20240913OG, 20240620TR and 20250625MR) provided testimony that included information on how their birth mother made the journey from a 'respectable' family home in the early 1960s to the shabby conditions her youngest son found her living in almost 30 years later. She was pregnant three times (giving birth to the four boys) in the 1960s. Three were adopted and one went into a children's institution. They all had the same birth father, but he went on to marry another woman and have several other children. Their birth mother was sent to Marianville during each of her three pregnancies. Her confinement in St Mary's, Belfast came 13 months after her first pregnancy when she was 24.

The sparse outline of these events first became available to the four brothers via the limited paperwork available in their birth mother's file. Their interaction with her various family members has deepened their knowledge of what happened. The two eldest sons first received bullet point information about St Mary's, Belfast, as 20240620TR explained:

- St Mary's was a live-in unit run by the GSS which opened in 1867.
- It was situated beside the Good Shepherd Convent and church on the Ormeau Road.
- It provided accommodation to girls and women over the age of 18.
- Most women were referred to St Mary's by their own families, or by the welfare authorities.
- Many of the women worked in the laundry which operated on the site until 1977.
- Their birth mother was admitted to St Mary's Residential Unit 15 months after the birth, in the 1960s (exact year redacted); she left St Mary's 13 months after entry.
- No details are recorded as to who referred their birth mother to St Mary's.
- No other details are recorded regarding their birth mother's time or occupation in the unit.

Like many other relatives of women who were sent to work in a GSS laundry, this woman's four sons know that she entered 'basically a laundry, and we don't know why, for thirteen months'. 20240620TR remembered that 'the social worker informed us that it was probably a form of punishment or maybe to keep her away from the man who was our birth father'. He is angry that she became part of what he called 'the Magdalene Laundry Industrial system...Why? Why for thirteen months, would you be put into such a place?'

One potential answer to the question why was in the files of the youngest brother 20240424TU. A social worker's notes recorded that his birth mother's parents 'see the whole episode as an unpleasant experience which must be suppressed and forgotten about'. Their birth mother's father was said to have 'a professional occupation' and her mother had an 'outstanding Catholic faith', implying that a mixture of Christian morality and social respectability were at the heart of the family's decision-making about their daughter. While the social worker noted her parents were keen to forget the existence of their daughter's fourth son, she appears to have been unwilling to do so as she did not sign adoption consent forms until he was ten years old.

The four brothers have also gained information from their birth mother's cousin. This supports the view that Christian ideologies about sinfulness and the 'fallen' woman coalesced with issues around the social status of other family members: in this example a socially mobile brother's career was apparently significant in the decision that led his sister to enter the St Mary's institution to work in the laundry. The birth mother's cousin wrote to 20240620TR to reveal his grandmother's mindset.

“

[She] was so overly religious it clouded her judgment. Her top priority was her religion and her church. She went to early Mass every single day and sometimes twice on Sundays.

This same cousin discovered the details of the secret pregnancies some years later. She recalled how the grandmother of the four sons had reacted.

“

[She] broke down when my Mum confronted her and she admitted that she and her son, and another son, brought [name of birth mother] to the convent, for three reasons, shame, the neighbours finding out and most of all their brother. He was a [detail of professional occupation and workplace redacted] in [family's home district] and he lived in a huge house in [name of more affluent area]. He later [details about promotion and move to a more affluent area].

The same cousin told the four brothers that their birth mother had become reclusive after the loss of her sons. She still lived reclusively when the four of them began to trace her from the 1980s and into the 1990s. Another of the brothers, 20250625MR, offered reflection on what happened to his birth mother and her inability to talk to her sons about it when they reunited.

“

[I have] concern at the enormous difficulties a young woman faced in having not one, but four children out of wedlock. Between the state and the church and her family, I feel our birth mother was completely abandoned. And I'm asking the question why did this have to be? She lived the life of a recluse for 40 years in various addresses...I was never really afforded the opportunity to get to know my birth mother, or to help her. By the time I met her I would have had questions for her regarding our lives, regarding our birth father, but she would have clammed up. She lived in a wee flat that had absolutely nothing, very little furniture, with a reclusive elder brother. I think she was, I think she should have been looked after so much better.

He also offered further evidence on the mixture of religious ideology and family respectability that was so damaging to his birth mother's life.

“

...we did find out that her mother ruled the house with a Catholic rod of iron. Any time I spoke, the few occasions that I spoke to [birth mother's name], she would have said 'I was with sin. I was with the devil.' And I know that she was more or less kept out of the way, kept out of the road, so that other people couldn't really see her or meet her.

20241010TB is another individual whose mother gave birth to four children and who did not have the opportunity to raise them in her own family unit. She was in Marianville before she gave birth to 20241010TB (who was her first child) in the mid-1960s before she was transferred immediately to St Mary's, Belfast. 20241010TB did not have the opportunity to reunite with her and his understanding of her experiences is taken from the personal files he has accessed as well as information from her friends and family.

His birth mother met his birth father when she was 18 and he was in his forties, in circumstances which concerned her social worker. 20241010TB has little information relating to his birth mother's experience in Marianville, but it is recorded that she was moved to St Mary's, Belfast and worked in its laundry for about six months after the birth. His birth mother's files refer to her having 'learned her lesson' on her departure from St Mary's laundry and it was suggested that she might want to attend meetings of the Legion of Mary. A senior cleric was asked to arrange this.

A friend of 20241010TB's birth mother told him that she had 'a hard life' and that her family was 'dysfunctional'. There was a 'large extended family' living in her home and poverty was 'rife' in the city where she lived. She was also able to provide details of his birth mother's relationship with his birth father and she made it clear that this man's behaviour was predatory. 20241010TB learnt that his maternal grandmother had a number of children outside marriage and that his birth mother was brought up by her own grandmother.

20241010TB explained that initially he knew only of his birth mother's time in Marianville. Her time in the laundry was not explained to him until he saw a reference to a 'St Mary's Home' and read about what type of institution that was. Having secured access to the relevant records he understood the confusion his birth mother must have been in. An exchange of letters between his birth mother and her social worker suggests that both were expecting her to return to her home. There was no mention of the St Mary's institution and its laundry.



Clearly my mother didn't know or hadn't been told that she was going to be incarcerated in a laundry, because in [a month] she's looking clothes to go home. The welfare even write to the nun and say we'll telephone when we're taking Mum home and then we see her on the [23 days after she gave birth] being admitted to Saint Mary's laundry...And the black cardigan and the black high heels [that she asked to be sent from home] don't suggest someone who thinks they're gonna be working in a laundry definitely not, that's a really crucial part of it.

He views what happened to her as 'punishment' and concludes that 'even though she's 18 she doesn't have a free will here. This is obviously against her consent. I can't imagine she would want to go in there.' 20241010TB quoted from letters written to and from the social worker at the time and concludes from them that there was more interest in getting a statement on his paternity (so that his birth father might be pursued for a financial contribution to the cost of his care) rather than regard for his birth mother's

wellbeing. In one letter, the social worker reported his birth mother's upset when she explained that the purpose of her visit was to question her about her baby's father and not to take her home. The social worker reported her findings.

“

[Name of birth mother] says she doesn't like staying in the convent. She does look rather thin and miserable and might be better back at her own work.

In advance of this visit, the birth mother's family had written to the social worker lobbying for the birth mother's return home. Their letter noted that this was her 'first time being away from home'. The relative wrote that 'I'm sure [name of birth mother] has learned her lesson by now'.

The following month, after a total of four months working in the laundry, 20241010TB's birth mother was returned home by the social worker who also directed her towards a local employer who might be hiring. The local welfare committee had also made plans to monitor her moral welfare. This involved writing to a senior cleric in her home city to advise him on her circumstances.

“

[She] returned home on the 1st of the month, following six months residence in Good Shepherd Convent, Belfast. As I mentioned to you earlier her baby boy is in the care of this committee. I think [name of birth mother] might now wish to attend Legion of Mary meetings and perhaps you would like to arrange that one of the members pays her a visit.

Assessing these pieces of information leads 20241010TB to conclude that his birth mother's family, various institutions in the Catholic Church and the welfare committee that was responsible for her wellbeing had between them arranged for his mother to be confined in the laundry where she worked without payment. There was no court order detaining this young woman in St Mary's, Belfast, yet the letter from her family suggests they understood that her placement in the institution represented some form of punishment for her pregnancy.

Ingrid O'Brien, who waived her right to anonymity, is from RoI but on two occasions in the 1960s, she was sent to Good Shepherd mother and baby institutions in NI: once to Marianvale in 1960, when she was 16, and then to Marianville in 1965, when she was 21. On both occasions, her baby was adopted. The second time, she travelled with her son to Fahan, Co Donegal, where he was left with the Sisters of Nazareth to await adoption. Ingrid then returned to Marianville and on her arrival she was transferred to St Mary's, Belfast. Her testimony explained how momentous this straightforward and short walk could be. Ingrid's understanding is that her mother had arranged all of this with the GSS. She recounted what she found on her return from Fahan.



[My suitcase] had been packed, and it wasn't in my room, and when I asked, I was told I was going into the laundry. My case had already gone into the laundry, and I was to go down a particular corridor that we had never used before. Well, I did, and I was met at the other end by a nun who brought me to the dormitory, and on we went.

11.3 Girls and women considered to be in 'moral danger' sent to St Mary's, Belfast

That some vulnerable girls and women were considered to be in 'moral danger' was another of the main reasons behind admissions to their three St Mary's institutions according to the GSS. The historical understanding of the term 'moral danger' is discussed in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries. It had widespread use and was a highly gendered term centred around the control and surveillance of female sexuality. 'Moral danger' might be applied to young girls living in a home where sexual abuse took place but equally it might be used to morally police the leisure activities of teenage girls and young women.

The term 'moral danger' was used 23 times in the more detailed admissions records for the years between 1963 and 1969. It was deployed in relation to a range of situations. On eight occasions teenage girls were admitted who were considered to be in 'moral danger' in their own homes. In the case of a teenager who was sent to St Mary's, Belfast in the 1960s (exact year redacted), it was recorded in her notes that she 'was in moral danger (Incest with father)'. She was admitted 'voluntarily' and stayed for two months before going to find work. The use of the term 'voluntarily' here may refer to a lack of involvement by the relevant welfare committee. The note on her 16-year-old sister, who was also admitted, also recorded her as being in 'moral danger'. In her case she was 'under [name of area redacted] Welfare'. She remained in St Mary's for almost two years when 'the Welfare allowed her home to her father who has all the family together now'.

Two other sisters, aged 15 and 16, had been admitted the year before in the 1960s (exact year redacted), brought by a religious order (name redacted) for 'care and protection'. It is not clear if they had been in an institution operated by this religious order, but their notes recorded that they 'went home to their father but were in moral danger' and this is why they were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast. The implication was again that this danger was from their father. The 16-year-old remained in St Mary's, Belfast for two years and the 15-year-old for two and a half years. The notes for both stated that they 'did very well here'. Both of them left (apparently when each reached their eighteenth birthday) to take up employment in some form of domestic service roles.

A 17-year-old girl was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) 'under [name redacted] welfare', following the death of her foster mother. The girl had continued to live 'with her foster father and was in moral danger'. She remained in St Mary's, Belfast for nine months before being taken out of the institution by a relative, at which point she found employment with a commercial laundry. A point that the GSS have regularly made in defence of their use of laundries in their St Mary's institutions is that it provided training for employment outside the institution. Commercial laundries were relatively large in number until the 1970s.

In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl was 'sent by [name redacted] welfare' as her 'mother used to take her with her to the caravan [of the man her mother was involved with], remain there all night and come home in the morning'. This teenager remained in St Mary's, Belfast for over a year before leaving to go to a hostel.

Welfare authorities are mentioned as being involved in three of these cases. As already detailed, one of these involved a teenage girl returned to the family home where it was known that her father had raped an older teenage daughter. In the other five cases where the assessment was that a teenage girl faced moral danger in her family home, the limited notes in the GSS files do not indicate if there was active involvement of social workers or the police. In the case of a 17-year-old admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted), who stayed for a month, she was recorded as having gone to 'the Police Barracks and asked to be sent here [St Mary's] as she was in moral danger at home'. The notes record that 'she was very troublesome here, ran away one evening' and that Miss 6, the social worker, 'took her to work in the [name of hospital]'.

The courts were involved in one case where a girl (age not recorded) was admitted for 'Care and Protection' in the 1960s (exact year redacted). She was described as being 'in moral danger living with her uncle'. Five other girls were admitted between 1963 and 1969 under court orders as they had been assessed to be in 'moral danger'. These included a 16-year-old girl admitted under a Fit Person Order (year redacted). Her records describe her as having 'no interest in anything but running around and acting foolishly' and that her mother suggested that she has always been 'giddy about men'. The notes also recorded that she had been 'assaulted by a married man whose children she was looking after while his wife was in hospital'. The files did not recall any police involvement in her case. She was certified as a 'Special Care' patient at some point during the two and a half years she remained in St Mary's, Belfast. This meant that she was assessed as having a learning disability and was registered with the Special Care Committee (each trust had a Special Care Committee).

In the 1960s (exact year redacted), two 16-year-olds were admitted under Fit Person Orders through Miss 7, a probation officer. Both remained for two and a half years with one girl attending the Psychiatric Child Guidance Clinic and being recorded as being 'improved' when she was 'discharged'. The second girl was described as 'living in [redacted] a district that houses most of the prostitutes in Belfast'¹⁹ and that as she had 'a low mentality she was in real danger'. She was certified as 'Special Care' while in St Mary's and she was 'allowed home by the Special Care authority' after two and a half years. Another 16-year-old was also admitted by a Fit Person Order (year redacted) by a Juvenile Court for 'unlawful carnal knowledge'. Her parents 'appealed the case' but as 'Welfare were not satisfied with the accommodation at home' she was sent to the Good Shepherd convent in Newry. In this case, it appears that the girl had been charged with this offence.

A 16-year-old girl was admitted under a residence order during the 1960s (exact year redacted), although she only stayed for five months. She had a long history recorded and appears to have been in the Sacred Heart Home and St Joseph's Training School, Middletown under a 'Fit Person Order for being beyond control and in moral danger'. She had been discharged from St Joseph's Training School on licence and charged with larceny, and had also been pregnant and given birth to a baby. Her time in St Mary's was not a positive experience; her notes recorded that the GSS felt she had 'no respect for authority' and 'had a very disturbing effect on the other girls – was planning one night to put her bed on fire' and that they 'had to get her transferred from here'. She was 'given a chance' to go to the Good Shepherd convent in Newry but she ran away after two weeks and was then sent back to St Joseph's Training School, where one evening she 'ran away and took eleven other girls with her'. It is not recorded what happened to her after this.

In two cases local welfare committees were involved in sending girls and women considered to be in 'moral danger' to St Mary's, Belfast without a court order. Miss 6 'brought' a 20-year-old in the 1960s (exact year redacted) who was certified 'Special Care' during her year and a half in St Mary's. Her notes record that she got married the year after she left St Mary's. Again in the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 22-year-old was 'brought by Derry Welfare'. She remained in the institution for two and a half years before transferring for a further ten months to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry and then returning to St Mary's, Belfast. There is no final leaving date on her record.

In two cases among the 1963–69 records it is noted that religious authorities 'brought' girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl was brought by the Sisters of Nazareth in Derry/Londonderry. She had been employed in their convent and on her nights off, the notes recorded that she 'kept late hours and was in moral danger'. The GSS commented on her record that they felt that she was 'well behaved for about a year and then came out of her shell and showed her true colours, impetuous, irresponsible, used bad language and had a bad influence'. She remained in St Mary's, Belfast for a year and a half but there is no indication of where she went on leaving.

In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 25-year-old woman was 'sent by' a priest. Her placement was described as 'voluntary', which again is likely to refer to a placement of a woman that was privately funded, possibly by her family. The GSS notes described her as 'mentally subnormal' and noted that she had been a patient at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. It was also noted that her 'parents feared she was in moral danger'. However, the GSS concluded that they were 'not able to keep' her as she had 'attempted an overdose of tablets, could not mix with her companions and on the whole [the St Mary's institution] was unsuitable for her'. The notes did not record what happened or if psychiatric help was sought, and although they do say 'Special Care' the Special Care Committee does not seem to have been involved. They also revealed that her parents were very angry that St Mary's, Belfast could not keep her, and that she seems to have stayed for just over a month.

Three women were admitted 'under Welfare', meaning that their local welfare committee had placed them in the institution. One was a 19-year-old who arrived in the 1960s (exact year redacted) and stayed for around six weeks before '[Miss 5] took her home'.

A 21-year-old also admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) 'under welfare' was described as an 'off character' and stayed for just under a year. A 15-year-old girl was also admitted in the 1960s 'under Belfast welfare' and stayed for a year and a half.

11.4 Girls and women who were recorded as 'Special Care' or having a learning disability who were admitted to St Mary's Belfast

Including the cases discussed above, there are 16 references to 'Special Care' in St Mary's, Belfast. The majority of these references are from the detailed records in the 1960s. As with some of the examples above, they suggest that the GSS St Mary's institutions were seen by a variety of actors (ranging from priests and parents through to social workers and welfare committees) as places in which to care for girls and young women with numerous types of very different complex needs. The reactions of the GSS to some of these cases suggest that the Order recognised there were limits to the range of individuals that the Sisters could supervise in their multigenerational and socially diverse St Mary's institutions.

There was regular engagement between the Special Care Committee and the GSS, with nine references to girls and women being certified as 'Special Care' while at St Mary's. This included a 24-year-old admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) whose notes describe how the GSS 'got her referred to Special Care and she was ascertained Special Care'. As it was discovered that this woman was pregnant, she was 'transferred to Marianville' and when her baby was born she was 'admitted to Muckamore Abbey Special Care Hospital'. The notes further record that she had two sisters in St Mary's, Belfast who were also assessed to be 'Special Care Patients'.

In around 35 additional cases there were references to mental health issues. It is evident that the GSS were not keen to accommodate girls and women with severe mental health issues and in eight instances there are explanations of why the GSS felt that individuals could not remain in St Mary's. These included a 15-year-old girl who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) and remained for three days before being committed by the court to St Joseph's Training School. Her notes recorded: 'she was not kept here as she seemed to be a mental case'.

Similarly, in the 1960s (exact year redacted) a 14-year-old stayed for two days with her notes recording 'this girl was a bit mental and took fits of epilepsy. Could not be kept.' It does not record where this teenage girl was sent when she left. The notes of a 23-year-old woman admitted in the 1940s (exact year redacted) simply recorded: 'mental. Had to be sent away.' A 13-year-old girl also admitted in the 1940s (exact year redacted) had 'this child is mental. Impossible to manage' recorded on her notes.

11.5 Girls and women who were sent by the courts to St Mary's, Belfast

Girls and women were sent to all three of the GSS St Mary's institutions via a number of legal routes. They centred on two broad pathways: one being around those with criminal convictions or facing criminal charges (including those girls and women on remand or on probation) and those for whom there were concerns around their 'safety' (including the victims of incest or girls considered by their parents, priests, social workers or others to be in 'moral danger' or to be 'at risk' because their parents were unable to 'control' them).

11.5.1 Girls and women sent to St Mary's, Belfast by the courts following a criminal conviction

From the first decades of the twentieth century, several institutions employed court visitors who attended courts and offered their services as an alternative to prison in the cases of female offenders facing a custodial sentence. These representatives were known as court missionaries. They were recognised as part-time probation officers both before and after the Probation of Offenders Act 1907.²⁰ In Belfast, the Salvation Army's Thorndale House and the St Mary's institution (and its laundry) were both used in this way by the courts.²¹

In 1944 the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal MacRory, wrote to the Ministry of Home Affairs to explain the work of the GSS.

“

[Their] mission and life work is to reclaim, care and train young girls who have fallen or are in peril of falling into evil ways of life...these Sisters have intensive, specific and lengthened training...the girls are given courses in cooking, laundry, housewifery, needlework, poultry keeping [and] arts and crafts.

He explained that in England the GSS received a grant of 30 shillings per head per week for those placed under their supervision and that the Sisters in NI were 'willing and eager to receive and be responsible for the care and custody of Catholic girls who may be committed by the courts, if reasonable aid is granted by your government'.²² St Mary's role in this regard was recognised under Section 11 of the Probation Act (Northern Ireland) 1950, which formally registered the institution for the 'reception of girls and women who were on probation [and in] whose cases the court deems it necessary to include a condition of residence in an institution'.²³

The registers of St Mary's recorded 180 women, nearly a third of those who have this information recorded, being sent to St Mary's, Belfast via the courts. In the majority of cases the register recorded 'court' with no further information. However, in some cases there was additional information recorded. For example, in the 1950s (exact year redacted), a 19-year-old who remained for a week appears to have been on remand as her notes recorded that she was 'taken out by authorities and sent to Armagh Jail'.

Similarly, a 58-year-old woman who was 'sent from the court' in 1934 was recorded as being 'remanded 3 months here'. A 66-year-old woman was 'brought from court' in 1951 with '3 month sentence' recorded. For a 17-year-old girl who was admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) 'brought from court 1 year sentence', it was recorded that she 'ran away' after five months. In at least six cases it was noted that girls and women 'sent by court' had run away, although there is no further information on what happened in these situations.

Newspaper reports of court cases in which girls and women were sent to St Mary's, Belfast offer further details that were often not recorded in the GSS admissions register. For example, when a woman was charged with stealing money in 1935, a Royal Ulster Constabulary detective inspector explained to the court that 'two ladies of the Good Shepherd Convent, Belfast, would take the girl provided she agreed to stay there for twelve months'. The defendant agreed and the 'Bench did not proceed with a conviction'.²⁴ Twenty-five years later, in 1960, a similar situation was reported when two teenage girls were placed on probation for two years for shoplifting. The magistrate told them 'he would either send them to the Good Shepherd Convent or to another place [prison]. If they agree, he would send them to the convent for one year, and this the girls agreed to.'²⁵

In some cases, women hesitated to accept committal to the Good Shepherd convent rather than prison. In March 1960, a 25-year-old shop assistant who had stolen £153 from her employer 'stated that she would prefer to go to prison for four months but then consented to the judge's order', which was that she serve 12 months on probation, six months of which 'would be spent at the Good Shepherd Convent'.²⁶

The GSS also readmitted women who had previously spent time in St Mary's, Belfast. In 1939, a woman who pleaded guilty to obtaining 4 shillings by deception had previously been in the Good Shepherd Belfast convent and 'they said they would take her back if she was not sent to prison'. The defendant agreed to this proposal and the magistrate said: 'if she went to the convent there would be nothing more said about it, but if she failed to do so he would send her to prison'.²⁷

11.5.2 Girls and women who were transferred from Armagh prison to St Mary's, Belfast

The records of Armagh Prison reveal that female prisoners were transferred from there to St Mary's, Belfast; again, this was done as part of a probation agreement. In 1925 a 23-year-old woman was found guilty of attempted suicide and the prison register recorded that as she had agreed to go to the 'Convent and be subject to the control of the Sisters' she was sentenced to 'one hours imprisonment', presumably meaning she could leave prison for the GSS Convent in Belfast, although no time period was specified for her stay there. In the 1950s (exact year redacted), a 20-year-old woman who had been convicted of theft was placed under the care of the probation officer 'for one year, on condition she becomes an inmate of the Good Shepherd Home Belfast'.²⁸ In the same decade (exact year redacted), a 20-year-old woman, also convicted of theft, was placed on probation for two years, on condition she stay in 'the Good Shepherd home'.²⁹

Again in the 1950s (exact year redacted), a woman was given a probation order for two years on condition ‘that she reside at the Good Shepherd Convent’. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 23-year-old, whose address was given as the Legion of Mary in Belfast, was convicted of being drunk and disorderly but received a conditional discharge because she agreed to go and stay in the Good Shepherd Convent.³⁰ In the most serious case, a woman convicted of the murder of her sister’s child was given life imprisonment in 1944, but secured an unconditional release to the Good Shepherd Convent in 1950.³¹ The register does not record how long she stayed in St Mary’s, Belfast.

11.5.3 Girls who were admitted to St Mary’s, Belfast under Place of Safety or Fit Person Orders

The courts also sent girls to the institution under Place of Safety Orders. This was the case with a relative of 20240526TB. Her relative was placed in the Sacred Heart Home at the GSS Convent in Belfast after her parents separated and she began truanting from school. It was not long after this that 20240526TB approached social workers and asked if she could also be placed in the Sacred Heart Home because of domestic violence in her family home. This was arranged, and she also went to live in the Sacred Heart Home where she had a comparatively happy time, appreciating the safety it provided away from the violence in the family home.

However, shortly after her arrival, 20240526TB’s relative requested a move to another family member’s home and this was also arranged, leaving 20240526TB behind in the GSS Convent. Two years later, when she was 15, 20240526TB’s relative arrived back at the Sacred Heart Home but then disappeared. A few weeks later 20240526TB saw this relative walking down a corridor in a part of the convent allocated to the laundry. Her relative remained there for around two years. When 20240526TB reached school-leaving age, the nuns told her she was going back to her father. She lost touch with her relative, who remained working in the laundry. 20240526TB has only sketchy knowledge of why her relative was sent to work in the laundry and why she was kept there for an extensive period.

Bernadette Ross’ testimony features more extensively in the chapter on St Mary’s, Newry, but she also spent one year in the Belfast GSS Convent. Like 20240526TB, she lived in the Sacred Heart Home and went out to school each day. While 20240526TB was there because of domestic violence, the violence associated with the Troubles was more central to Bernadette’s being placed in the Sacred Heart Home. Bernadette explained that when she was 13, she accompanied her 15-year-old sister and a cousin to ‘soldier dances’. Her sister attended them ‘four to five nights a week’, whereas Bernadette just went on Saturday nights. These dances were relatively common in towns and cities in NI in the early 1970s after the deployment of the British Army at the start of the Troubles. Bernadette explained what happened next.

“

...because of the soldier dances my father called in this social worker, and he put me in the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast in Ormeau Road. Well, I'd been going to the soldier dances, as I said earlier, for nine weeks or so, and then I run away from home. I run away a couple of times. So, my father put me in the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast. My sister, who continued to go to soldier dances, four or five nights a week, he kept at home. He was told that my sister would be sorted. By paramilitaries, Republican paramilitaries told my dad my sister would be sorted if she didn't stop going, fraternising with the enemy.

Bernadette was sent to the Sacred Heart Home and attended a local school while she lived there. She explained her understanding of the site at the time.

“

[I] didn't know there was the laundry there. In that respect we were in the front of the building, we were kept there, we didn't know anything about the laundries or Marianville, was only years later I found out that.

Her placement in the GSS Convent was arranged by a social worker after Bernadette's father had told social services she was 'out of control'. She explained that 'he put me away for the year'. Bernadette was complimentary about the nuns she encountered in the Sacred Heart Home: the 'nuns were a totally different breed, they knew how to treat children'. She was permitted to go on home visits but 'refused to go because of my father'. When she did go home there were rows, not about Bernadette and her sister 'but marital rows and I wanted out'. She explained that 'I would ask to go back to the Good Shepherd on the Ormeau Road, because that was my sanctuary'.

This aspect of Bernadette's testimony reveals how concerns around 'moral danger' and being out of 'parental control' led the state to intervene in family dynamics and to institutionalise teenage girls such as her. On this occasion Bernadette was sent to the Sacred Heart Home rather than St Mary's and, therefore, was not expected to work in the laundry. In her case, that came later when she was sent to St Mary's, Newry, as is discussed in the chapter on that institution.

20250502FB is not fully aware of how his mother came to be in the St Mary's institution in the early 1960s. However, it is possible that the courts were involved in sending her there, possibly under a Fit Person or Place of Safety Order. He now knows that when his mother was 15, she became pregnant and was sent to Marianville. The father of her child was convicted of unlawful carnal knowledge of a minor and served a two-year prison sentence. However, 20250502FB observed that 'my mum got punished too. Yeah, she was punished.' He is not sure how long she remained in the laundry, but an aunt has told him that 'my mother got a year, a year for underage or whatever. I don't know what she got a year for.'

His aunt has told him that his mother had her hair cut when she arrived in the laundry. She also had her name changed. She remained there for several months. He explained that he had been told very little about what had gone on because it was not something his mother wanted to talk about when she was alive: 'I don't think my mum would've took any questions. I think my mum didn't want to talk about it, don't know what went on, but she didn't want to talk about it.' The son that his mother gave birth to at this time was taken home by his grandparents and raised as their son. It was only when he was an adult that 20250502FB discovered that his 'uncle' was really his eldest brother. His testimony also includes details of the impact this had on the mental health of both his mother and his eldest brother.

20250526BL was sent to St Mary's, Belfast at the age of 16. She was the victim of sexual abuse in her family home and was removed after the intervention of social services, providing further evidence that when faced with a traumatised teenage girl, the state deemed that the Good Shepherd Convent and work in its laundry was an appropriate option. 20250526BL has a 'strong memory' of being in a court during this process, which happened in the early 1970s. She has been given help to access her records and has learnt that she was in the laundry on two separate occasions, but she does not remember much about this and explained that her mind has blocked out many of her traumatic experiences from this time.

11.5.4 Girls who were sent by the courts to St Mary's, Belfast between 1963 and 1969

As noted above, the St Mary's, Belfast records offer more detail for a number of girls and women who arrived in the institution between 1963 and 1969. This section offers examples from those records because they offer more detail on the relationship between the courts and the GSS. In particular, they indicate the extent to which various wings of the state were dependent on the St Mary's institutions. They also reiterate the variety of court orders through which teenage girls were confined.

The more detailed records that are available for 1963–69 include 63 cases with reference to courts, with 58 of these relating to girls who were under 18. The five women who were over 18 included a 34-year-old woman, admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted), about whom the GSS note-keeper expressed some unusual suspicions. The notes about this woman recorded: 'says she is a Protestant but we think she is a baptised Catholic'. Miss 3, a probation officer, had asked the GSS to admit her while she was out on bail 'due to £70 she owed to hotels'. The notes go on to say that the woman had been living in Canada and said that she had money in the bank there but 'due to a bank strike it could not be got through'. The GSS note-keeper added: '[we] have our doubts about that too'. When she had gone back to court the notes recorded that the GSS 'would not take her back again as she seemed a dangerous character'.

A 21-year-old woman was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) on a probation order as she had run away from her family home to England where it was alleged that 'she was living in a bad house in [city in England]'. Her parents 'went over and brought her home' but they were said to have found their daughter 'unmanageable' and that she

was 'out at night – not working etc'. This young woman was also placed on probation, for three years. There are no details as to whether she remained in St Mary's, Belfast for three years or not.

In the cases of those aged under 18, 26 girls were admitted to St Mary's under a Fit Person Order with 13 of these recorded as being under the responsibility of Miss 3, the probation officer. A Fit Person Order might be implemented in cases of incest or 'moral danger'. In these instances their aim was to 'protect' a girl from her environment or a particular individual. However, 14 other Fit Person Orders related to situations where girls had run away from home or were deemed to be out of the control of their parents. These included a 16-year-old girl who, in the 1960s (exact year redacted), was described as being 'beyond control and keeping very undesirable company'. It was recorded that her father had 'asked [Miss 3] to put her in a place of safety' and, as a result, his daughter was confined in St Mary's, Belfast for two years. Another 16-year-old girl who was confined in the institution in the 1960s (exact year redacted) had been 'attending late dances' and allegedly was getting 'out of hand'. She also remained in the institution for two years before leaving for an office job. In the case of a 15-year-old who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) it was recorded that she had 'had an abortion' a week before she was admitted. It is not clear if this was a miscarriage (which was referred to as a 'spontaneous abortion') or a 'criminal abortion'. She remained in St Mary's, Belfast for a year and a half before returning home.

In 14 cases, girls under 18 years old were sent to St Mary's, Belfast on remand or under an interim order before a court case took place.³² A 15-year-old girl was confined for four days in the 1960s (exact year redacted), having been brought by the police as she had run away from her family home four times. Subsequently, the court placed her on probation in her own home. A 16-year-old girl was brought to the institution in the 1960s (exact year redacted) and remained for 16 days after she left home and stayed with a married man who was '31 years of age and has a police record'. She was also placed on probation at home. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), an 18-year-old was admitted for a weekend, while she was on remand, before being sent by the court to St Joseph's Training School. Her GSS notes claimed that she 'had a bad and disturbing effect on the other girls'.

On two occasions girls were confined under Fit Person Orders after a criminal conviction. A 17-year-old girl was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) having been put on probation for theft but had broken probation by staying out all night and was brought home by the police before being sent to St Mary's, Belfast for one year. The GSS notes offered their assessment of the situation, speculating that her 'delinquencies are probably a manifestation of her disturbed home background combined with the lower than average IQ'. Also in the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old was admitted under a Fit Person Order 'for breaking a gas meter box and taking the money into her own home'.

Other court orders placing girls in St Mary's, Belfast included a supervision order, which was used in four cases. A 16-year-old girl was 'committed for one year' in the 1960s (exact year redacted) at the request of a welfare committee. She ran away from St Mary's and was missing for three days before being brought back by the police, and her notes record that she 'had to attend special clinic in Royal for three months after

returning' (suggesting that she had contracted a sexually transmitted disease). She was taken home by a social worker around one year after she was admitted. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 15-year-old girl was placed under the supervision of Miss 3, the probation officer, for two years. The court stipulated that the first of those years was to involve her confinement at St Mary's, Belfast. This teenager was in a relationship with a 21-year-old man who had been imprisoned for theft. Her parents were recorded as wanting to have her at home but being 'aware of the difficulties unless she can make a break' with this man.

11.6 Girls and women who were brought by the police to St Mary's, Belfast

Thirty-three (5.2%) of girls and women were brought by the police to St Mary's, Belfast. As with other St Mary's institutions, it is evident that it was used by the police in situations where short-term accommodation was needed, with the majority of girls and women brought by the police only staying for a short time. For example, of the 20 girls and women who were brought by the police between 1963 and 1969, all were teenagers and where we have the information, 12 stayed for less than one month.

Fourteen girls were brought after they had run away from home. These included a 14-year-old who, in the 1960s (exact year redacted), ran away from her home in London. She was returned home after spending one night in St Mary's. Two years later, a 16-year-old girl was brought by the police having run away from home. Her notes recorded that 'she was to be sent home the next day but decided herself to stay' in St Mary's, Belfast. However, they go on to say that 'after about a fortnight she ran away from here and was found by the police and put to the Good Shepherd Convent in Derry' but 'she ran away from there the same evening'.

11.7 Girls and women who were sent from other institutions to St Mary's, Belfast

Girls and women were also sent from other institutions. The frequency with which transfers took place between children's institutions and industrial schools to Magdalene laundries in RoI was identified by the McAleese Report, which was set up to investigate the relationship between the state in RoI and the Magdalene laundries.³³ In the St Mary's, Belfast register, at least 74 girls and women were recorded as having spent time in an institution run by the Sisters of Nazareth in either in Belfast or Derry/Londonderry. Many of the 63 teenage girls had the terms 'no friends' or 'no relations' recorded on their notes. It appears that having become too old for a children's home and with no contactable family to provide a home for them, they were transferred to St Mary's, Belfast.

An 18-year-old girl was brought by the police from Nazareth House in Belfast in the 1960s (exact year redacted), with the GSS note-keeper recording that 'she was keeping late house – used to get out through the window in Nazareth House with other girls'. She stayed at St Mary's, Belfast for a year and a half and it was noted: 'did very well here'. A 16-year-old girl was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) whose mother had been in Marianville: the notes recorded that she 'was reared in Nazareth House from infancy'. There are no details about how long she stayed in St Mary's, Belfast.

A 17-year-old who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) had been 'reared by the [Nazareth] Sisters' and had been 'sent over to Nazareth House in [city in England] – was employed in the kitchen but could not get on with her companions'. Her notes described her as 'a strange character – very good and quiet at times. Talks about entering a convent – at other times bold and defiant'. Her notes then record that after just over a year she was taken to Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The notes for a 23-year-old in the 1960s (exact year redacted) show how she had been in three institutions, living and working, before she came to St Mary's, Belfast. She had come from the Good Shepherd Convent in Derry/Londonderry in the 1960s (exact year redacted) where she had been for four years, having been 'reared in Nazareth House' in Derry/Londonderry. She had also worked for two years in Nazareth House in Fahan, but had been sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry 'because of some misbehaviour with the younger girls'.

A similar pattern of movement between GSS convents and Nazareth institutions was evident in the notes of a 22-year-old admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted). She had been 'in Nazareth House Derry for years' and was 'then sent to the Good Shepherd Convent in Derry'. Her notes then stated that 'the Sisters of Nazareth House decided to give her a chance to work in Nazareth Lodge in Belfast'. They went on to say that she was 'alright for a while but then got very impertinent and quarrelsome. She was to be sent back to Derry/Londonderry so she asked if we would take her here'. In St Mary's, Belfast the notes recorded: 'she was quite well behaved for a few months. Then she started having a bad influence on the other girls – telling them filthy jokes and giving them wrong ideas about marriage.' This apparently led to the girls turning 'against her and would not be seen with her', so 'she asked to be sent back to the Good Shepherd Convent Derry' after six months.

The next largest source of referrals from a religious organisation to St Mary's was the Legion of Mary, with 54 girls and women being referred from Legionaries, Mater Dei (a mother and baby institution run by the Legion of Mary) or Sancta Maria (an institution for homeless women run by the Legion of Mary in Belfast). A 35-year-old woman, admitted from Mater Dei in 1952, was recorded as having 'no friends'. She left after five years, but it is not recorded where she went.

12.0 Older women who were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

Numerous women entered St Mary's, Belfast late in their lives. The GSS records do not provide any commentary through which to assess whether these women were placed in the institution by family members or if they arrived independently. Of the 24 women whose ages are recorded between 55 and 70, 23 had family members' addresses recorded. In only two of these cases is the woman concerned recorded as returning to this family address when they left the institution.

Any women who 'self-referred' to St Mary's, Belfast perhaps did so because they had no other option. Such women may have been among those in the first regular admission criterion outlined in the GSS 2018 statement, that of 'domestic violence', or a combination of that with the GSS second criterion of 'homelessness and lack of family support'. The only details written in the admissions register about a 58-year-old woman,

who entered in 1938, were: 'No Friends. Widow's pension.' Length of stay is not recorded for all of these women; however, some of those in the older age categories did not remain in the GSS institution for very long. A 60-year-old who arrived in 1938 was gone within a few hours. The short note on her records was: 'Mind affected. Did not keep her overnight.' In the same year, a 69-year-old 'remained for a few months' before leaving. A 69-year-old arrived in October 1948 and 'Left at her own request' the following month. In an unusual case, a 64-year-old woman from Co Cork was recorded as 'waiting for a boat to take her back to the USA' and 'left after a year for America'. These cases suggest a degree of complexity around admissions to St Mary's, Belfast, but the sparse written records do not allow any appreciation of those circumstances.

13.0 Daily life in St Mary's, Belfast

The GSS records do not provide a great deal of evidence about daily life or work in St Mary's, Belfast. However, inspection reports of the St Mary's Senior Group in 1993 did explain that a uniform was worn in the institution up to 1975 and that the women in the institution spent their days in the laundry in 'prayerful work'.³⁴ This is another area in which the evidence provided via testimony is vital in building up any understanding of how the institution functioned and how it was experienced by those who were sent there to live and work. It is also possible to draw upon the conclusions and observations of the HIAI about the GSS and the teenage girls who were sent to work in their laundries.

13.1 What the GSS records and testimony tell us about daily life in St Mary's, Belfast

The GSS provided a written submission in 2018 for the QUB and UU report, which detailed the functions of all their institutions in NI. In terms of the information provided on their St Mary's institutions, the GSS provided more detailed examples related to the one in Newry, but it appears the routines and aims of the institution were the same across the three of them in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry. The GSS stated their purpose.



St Mary's was primarily a facility for adult women who were vulnerable or otherwise required a place of sanctuary or protection. Periods of residency could fluctuate from days/weeks to many years/decades.³⁵

In terms of the daily routine, this statement maintained that the GSS and the girls and women working in the laundry 'had access to the same dietary provisions'. The communal kitchen was 'staffed by Sisters (and in later years secular employees)'. Three meals were served: breakfast, lunch and dinner plus a 'light supper'. The GSS' statement maintained the following.



[On] busier days in the laundry there was always 'cocoa and ginger snaps' afterwards. [And] family and friends would have been provided for too and special days, like Christmas Day, marked appropriately.

Discussing the laundry itself, the GSS statement observed that it ‘served the wider community’, including ‘private homes, B&Bs and hotels’ and used ‘modern machinery’ to carry out this work. Describing the daily routine, the GSS statement noted that Mass took place at 7.30am daily and that ‘the ladies would have been expected to attend 2–3 times a week but not every day’. It noted how they spent their leisure time.



...the ladies engaged in arts and crafts, singing and music. They often put on great plays which the Sisters recall with great fondness for the fun and laughter generated. There was great camaraderie among the ladies and Sisters alike.

According to the GSS statement, the working week in the laundry was Monday to Friday. The statement also reported that the GSS in Belfast provided outings to local seaside towns, such as Newcastle and Warrenpoint. At the latter destination they had dinner in the Diamond restaurant. In the summer, holiday homes were rented in either the Glens of Antrim, Waterfoot, Cushendall, Newcastle or Bangor, ‘so that the ladies could, in rota, get a weeklong holiday’.

Two Sisters provided statements to the HIAI on the daily routine in the 1960s at St Mary’s, Belfast, which indicated a regimented timetable. Everyone got up at 6.30am or 7.00am. Following breakfast, work in the laundry began at 9.00am and was halted for a mid-morning tea break. They recalled that lunch was at 12 noon or 12.30pm and involved ‘a full and nutritious meal’. An hour’s lunch break was followed by work until 5pm, which also included an afternoon tea break. An evening meal was taken at 6.30pm and the girls and women could then use their recreation room where they ‘played games, knitted, embroidered, and chatted’. Everyone ‘retired to bed before 10 pm’.³⁶

The HIAI examined disciplinary regimes that existed within the GSS St Mary’s institutions and ruled that there was ‘some justification’ to the GSS claim to be ‘enlightened’ in this regard. In 1897, the Order issued a directive forbidding its Sisters to strike a ‘child’.³⁷ At this point, the GSS referred to all those in the institutions as children, making this directive a proscription of corporal punishment for all. In their closing statement to the HIAI, the GSS reiterated that there was no corporal punishment regime in place in any of their institutions in Ireland. They urged the HIAI not to impose what they called ‘revisionist standards’ on institutions which operated many years ago.³⁸

However, the HIAI noted that other forms of punishment were used. The evidence of witnesses to the HIAI indicated that punishments included being made to scrub floors or to eat meals while standing up. One woman, HIA211, also recalled a method of punishment using a ‘black book’. She explained.



...on Sunday, we went into a big room and sat down on chairs. Sister 312 read out the names of the girls noted in the black book and what they had done wrong. We had to stand when our name was read out and then kneel down and say sorry.³⁹

The GSS accepted that this was the practice from the 1950s until the mid-1970s in the three St Mary's institutions in NI. The HIAI ruled as follows.

“

[The policies of] reading out misdemeanours in front of others and making the offender kneel, or making an offender stand to eat her meal, were a form of deliberate humiliation and amounted to emotional abuse.⁴⁰

Sister 2 gave testimony in 2018 for the QUB and UU report and explained that she spent around one year working in the laundry at the GSS Convent in Belfast. This was during the 1960s. She explained her view that the St Mary's institutions 'were very much part of the culture of the time'. Sister 2's view was that a lot of the women 'were very vulnerable people' who were not 'capable of independent living on their own'. For this reason, the GSS offered them 'a place of protection where there was a great atmosphere among them'. Sister 2 commented that 'today, now, it obviously wouldn't be accepted...but at the time everybody knew it was part of the story, welfare people were there'. She added that the state was 'paying for the accommodation of some of the girls and women'. Sister 2 recalled that the state also carried out inspection visits: there were 'two or three people who would come and visit them [the women in the laundry] and walk around the place'. She explained her view.

“

...these women...have a home, they're being fed. Yes, they did work in a laundry, so did we...I myself worked in the ironing room for about a year, you know? The craic was great, you know I was young, you know?

She recalled 'plays and operettas' being put on in the convent to which 'the Bishop would come and a flock of priests'.

Sister 2 argued that profits from the laundry were the GSS' 'only source of income' and that there was 'no government subsidy'. Towards the end of her testimony, she reflected on the changes that had taken place over the course of a century. She commented on why the GSS had come to Belfast in the 1860s, explaining that it was a poor town then where 'prostitution would have been rife'. However, she explained her view that there was increased training in social work undertaken by numerous GSS from the 1960s and 1970s, and this led to an ability to enhance the education of the girls and women who were placed with them. She maintained that some of the girls and women from St Mary's, Belfast went to night classes in the 1970s.

“

[The GSS] leadership would have been very keen that the younger people coming into care would have got education and opportunities.

Although he obviously was not a member of the GSS, Priest 1 offered a viewpoint from someone who had worked inside their convent in Belfast. He began by outlining how as a child he took his family's own washing to the GSS Convent in Belfast to be cleaned in the laundry. Decades later, as a priest he became a chaplain in the convent. He maintained that, like most other Catholics in the past, when a young woman was referred to the GSS 'that was the end of the affair. Because we trusted them...They were competent and honest.' His view of this was shaped by his own childhood memories.

“

I visited that laundry many a times when I was...a young person....like a lot of other people, that's where our laundry went. I wasn't even in my teens. And I used to go into the laundry and see all these young women busy working away, and of course once we came to the place – the hatch – where there was a— we got the delivery or whatever we were doing – there was great excitement. Everybody saying hello and all that. And I think it was because there was so little doing by way of visitors and all that.

Priest 1's recollections coincided with those of 20240526TB, in terms of the separate group of women within St Mary's, Belfast who were called 'the Magdalen'. By this, he meant the Magdalene Sisters, who were discussed briefly earlier in this chapter. They were a separate religious community who had taken a vow to live in prayer and silence. They had separate accommodation within the GSS Convent. At one point Priest 1 was chaplain to them. He reflected on this group of women.

“

[I] always presumed that these were people who might have been sent by the courts...but then some of them had become attracted to the religious life, and this title of the Magdalen was sort of transferred on to this religious community within the Good Shepherd. And that was about as much as we knew. I simply knew them as religious Sisters, and that this had been the background of some of them. But you never made any enquiries as to what...again, the presumption was that they were in good hands.

As the discussion of the St Mary's records indicates, a number of girls and women who entered the institution for a variety of reasons were recorded as having joined the Magdalens (later known as Sisters of the Cross). Priest 1's duties as chaplain to the Magdalens involved 'visiting them from time to time...the occasional celebrating the Mass or maybe talking to people if any of them wanted to talk to me about anything. But these, of course, would be spiritual matters.' His assessment of them was that they 'were the kind of people that you meet in a religious community which is somewhat different, in a sense, because there was a kind of closed community'. In his experience, they had 'their own sort of private jokes and their own idea of merriment'. These women 'seemed to have come to terms with whatever their life meant. They seemed to be remarkably happy people.'

13.2 What the testimony of women and their relatives tells us about daily life in St Mary's, Belfast

Several testimonies were shared with the IP (and earlier to the QUB and UU report) offering significant insights that often differ from the GSS perspective on life in this institution. Ingrid O'Brien was in St Mary's, Belfast for around nine months in 1965. Ingrid recalled being 'allocated' to a job in the laundry by the nun 'running my section of it'. She described the role she was given as being 'actually...a quite clean nice job'. Ingrid was tasked with the 'packing of the laundry to hotels and restaurants'. Sheets and table napkins arrived in the laundry and she 'would fold them and allocate them according to... whichever hotel or restaurant they belonged to'. Ingrid believes that she was relatively fortunate in the work she was expected to carry out, although she remembered it taking place 'all day, every day'.

“

I don't know if you've ever spoken to a prisoner, they'll always tell you that the library is the best place to work in, well I think, and they give those library jobs to people who are white-collar workers. I think I was treated as a white-collar worker. In that I wasn't given a wet dirty job, I was given a dry clean job. It was boring, incredibly boring, folding napkins, folding pillowcases, folding sheets, all day. You never saw anybody. The only person that I worked with was the nun in charge of this section, a nice lady but, so terribly boring.

Ingrid's parents operated a successful business in a town where there was another Good Shepherd convent. Asked about the other women in the laundry and the general environment, Ingrid recalled that 'we didn't talk', which she put down to the fact that other women had been there '40 years, 50 years, they'd come in at 18 and they were going to die there. So, there was very little to talk about.' Ingrid said this made her feel 'awful for them and awful for me'. She did not discuss her personal circumstances with the other women because 'to confide in somebody, you would have had to have built up a trust and that didn't happen'. Asked to explain why there was no trust, she described her reticence.

“

I don't know. We were controlled at all times, there was always a nun around, so really the only person you could confide in was going to be a nun, but you didn't know what she was going to say to all the other nuns.

The rules and regulations in the laundry were 'more strict' than in Marianville and the hard work was carried out for no pay.

“

The job had to be done, and it had to be done well, and had to be done by a certain time, and a certain date, so it was an all-hands-on-deck all the time. And of course you weren't getting paid for it. So, there wasn't even the reward at the end of the day. There was never a reward of any sort for doing a good job. You didn't go for dinner and find you had a jelly and ice cream, because you know, you were supposed to be doing it to apologise to God for your sins.

Ingrid described a very dull existence during the time when she was not working in the laundry.

“

There were no books. There may have been a pack of cards, don't remember one, but there may have been one. I'd be surprised if there wasn't because they were innocent enough. There were no games. There was no, there was no group activity, so there was no teaching each other dancing or singing or hula-hooping or whatever. There was no activity like that. And there was no place to have an activity. We sat around in the evening, we had dinner and we sat around. We went to bed at nine o'clock. I don't remember what time we got up at, probably seven.

Another element of life that Ingrid recalled was the sanitary protection that was provided: 'they made their own sanitary towels by making wads of material, which were then washed and reused. And I couldn't, I couldn't bear the thought of reusing them.'

However, for Ingrid, the most significant part of the experience and the one that motivated her to offer her testimony was her memory of having electroconvulsive therapy. She does not know how this came about or what was its purpose.

“

I don't know, did I once talk to a psychiatrist who said that I needed it? I don't know. Did I sign papers? I have no recollection of signing papers. I think if I, I must have, but I think if they were explained to me, they were explained in a way that I didn't understand, because it was only years later that I realised that what I had gone through was actually electric shock treatment.

Ingrid recalled that she went to a hospital, somewhere in Belfast, on up to six occasions. She was taken there by one of the women who was a trustee in the GSS Convent and was given the task of accompanying girls and women from the laundry to medical appointments. This protocol was at least partly a consequence of the fact that the GSS was an enclosed Order prior to the Second Vatican Council in 1964. This meant that GSS were cloistered within the convent and could take trips outside only with the permission of the bishop.

Ingrid explained what she remembers taking place at the hospital.

“

I was brought in by a doctor and nurse in white, and I was laid on a trolley, and I was given an injection. And, sometime later, and I feel it was maybe twenty minutes to half an hour I woke up, and I could only move in slow motion. So, I could lift my hand...very slowly, and eventually I could sit up, and eventually I could put my legs over the side, but I was not on the trolley, I was in a bed. And, as time passed, I was able to speed up, and I would then get dressed. I wasn't fully naked I probably had a bra and knickers on, or I didn't have my outer clothes on. I put on my clothes, I came out of the room, a tiny cubicle of a room, to see where I was, and the lady who had brought me was sitting there waiting for me. And she asked me how I was, was I okay. And I said 'yes', and we went back to the, to the home. And that happened each time. And I know it happened a couple of times, but I would think six.

Ingrid explained how she felt when, years later, she concluded that what she experienced was electroconvulsive therapy.

“

I thought that shock treatment was only given to people who were very psychotic. And I was rather shocked that I should have been, that somebody felt I was in need of such treatment.

Ingrid would like to access her medical records to investigate the details of what happened to her, but she outlined that 'I don't even know the names of the hospitals, I don't know the dates and I've never done anything about it. It's just something I would have liked to do but haven't done.' Research in contemporary newspapers reveals that from 1959 Belfast had several mental health day centres that offered electroconvulsive therapy among their treatments. The first was located at 64 Clifton Street and was operated by Holywell Hospital Management Committee in cooperation with Purdysburn Hospital Management Committee.⁴¹ The GSS have commented on Ingrid's experience and offered an observation on the difficulty of responding fully to this element of her testimony.

“

If this occurred it would have been an intervention on medical grounds and would not have been administered by a [GSS] Sister. The [GSS] have no collective memory of such a medical intervention. Individual medical records may assist the researchers.

20250526BL was sent to St Mary's, Belfast, aged 16, after she was sexually abused within her family home. She explained the impact of her trauma on her memory. She believes that her brain has 'closed down' much of her recall from that period in her life. Asked about her thoughts on arriving in the St Mary's institution, she recalled the following.

“

I do remember it being better than being at home, which isn't quite...but it was because of family circumstances I guess that it was horrific for me at home so, I remember I was working in a laundry.

She recalled that one nun was 'nice' but described some of the others as 'mentally abusive'. She recalled no 'physical stuff' but did remember missing items.

“

...when I'd gone away for a weekend, I don't know where I'd gone, it might have been I went out, I might have run away, I don't know but when I came back everything was taken from my room, they used to take clothes, they used to go through my clothes and remove certain clothes.

20250526BL explained that the nuns denied that they had taken any of her clothes. Generally, she described them as 'quite mean, nasty' and that derogatory terms were used about the girls and women in the laundry. In relation to the work she was directed to undertake, 20250526BL remembers that her hand was burnt on more than one occasion in the laundry. There was some kind of 'brass ball' and it was used for 'putting hats over the top, like a cap or something over the top.' She was not sure if these were something 'that the nuns wore, or something the priests wore', but she does 'remember being burnt on that a couple of times, not badly but you know, catching my hand on it, whatever it was. It was like a heated thing.' Other than that, she revealed that 'I don't remember much about the laundry at all'.

She also did not 'remember having friends there. I don't remember there being any connection there.' But she explained that her 'terrible fear of mice' comes from the time when she opened a cupboard in the convent 'and there was a nest of mice and it was really, really frightening and since then that's where my real big fear is: mice'. She has also been left with 'a fear' of small changing rooms in clothing shops because of the memories it stirs of the sleeping accommodation at the St Mary's institution.

“

I remember the rooms, they were like you were in one area but there was all curtains across and it was like you had a bed and something beside the bed, like a little cabinet or something beside the bed. I don't know if the curtains went all the way round, I just remember a curtain being, you know, like a changing room you'd go into.

20250527BG spent three years in St Mary's, Belfast during the early 1960s, only leaving when she asked someone who was leaving the institution to post a letter that she had written to her mother asking to be taken home. She described the daily routine in the laundry.

“

I remember more in the laundry, because I was shaking out sheets and, you know, for it [to] be put through a roller. And you were there from, well you were up at seven o'clock in the morning, you had to go to Mass, then you came back and you had your breakfast, and then you went into the laundry to work from that to five o'clock. So that's basically what I had to do. And I was there for three years.

She slept in a dormitory, 'where there was a whole lot of beds and girls'. Asked if she received wages for her work in the laundry, she replied: 'Oh, no, no, no, you, because, for your keep. You got your bed and you got your food and that was it. And I'm sure anybody that was in there would have told you the same.' She was not critical of the GSS – in fact she was complimentary about them – but at the same time her testimony portrayed isolation and powerlessness.

“

[The nuns] were grand. They were grand. They never done me no harm. I can tell you that, because they had concerts and different things, you know, at the weekend, and that there, and we had television... So no, they didn't. I didn't want to be there, of course, until I got the letter out and got home. But there was no buses from [her home town] at that time to Belfast, I don't think, I don't know. And my mother lived out in the country, so obviously it was difficult to be able to, to go. And she didn't drive at that time or anything, you know... I thought I'm here, I was put here, and I have to stay here. I could not fault them [the nuns] in any shape or form. They were kind and you got your food and you got your bed. You didn't want to be there, but what could you do?

20250527BG reunited with her daughter, who had been adopted, when the latter turned 18. Remarkably, this was arranged when 20250527BG put a notice in a local newspaper to explain that she was looking for her daughter. This daughter also gave testimony and was given the code 20250513BQ. She provided further detail about 20250527BG's time in the institution. This included the fact that her birth mother was given a new name when she arrived to work in the laundry. 20250513BQ also reflected on the fact that her birth mother does not harbour any bitterness about the fact that she lost three years of her life when she was sent to the laundry. She believes that her birth mother shared a sentiment that features in a lot of testimonies from birth mothers who were sent to mother and baby institutions or St Mary's institutions, which is that it had been instilled in them to accept what was happening to them because they internalised the viewpoint that they had 'sinned' and were worthy of punishment.

“

She doesn't hold any huge resentment, but I think she was that naive that she didn't really understand what was happening. I think she felt that this was her form of punishment for doing what she did. And she accepted her lot...she would have been naive [and] she really didn't know what the timeline was. I don't know what the regime would have entailed, whether you had to wait until somebody claimed you again, like a family member. And it was only when she sent the note out to, with somebody to her own mother, that they then came and took her out. So obviously you had to be claimed out...I think she's nearly at the stage where she thinks, 'Well, I had to go there for a reason because I slipped up and I had to be punished', and she conformed and she felt that was normal.

In contrast, 20250513BQ does not view what happened to her birth mother as 'normal' and views it as 'a form of imprisonment and punishment'.

20240904BL traced her birth mother after the latter had been in St Mary's, Belfast for four decades. A social worker arranged a meeting between them in the GSS Convent but 20240904BL explained that there was no real connection between them and that her birth mother appeared vulnerable and institutionalised. Describing the meeting, she noted her impressions.

“

...it wasn't like you see on the television [laughs]...It was strange. There was no hugs and she didn't tell me much, maybe she wasn't able to tell me much, but it was just, it was just like sitting talking to, I don't know, strange. And then I went back one more time, and I regret to say I didn't go again because I was just, I wasn't getting anything, you know.

During the meeting, her birth mother 'talked more about general things like, you know, are you married and have you got children, but there was no emotions on her, she was just sort of, it was nothing'. Two of her uncles also visited her birth mother in the institution and 20240904BL got mixed messages about how she might have experienced life there.

“

I think according to my uncle [Uncle 1], Sister T who ran the convent was very good to her. But I was talking to...a cousin who lives in Belfast, who would have been my mother's niece. And she said her father [name of Uncle 2] used to take them up, his two daughters, up to see her and she says 'well if she was really happy why was she always crying when we left...' she said to her Daddy, 'Why is Aunt [birth mother's first name] always crying you know when we leave?'

Another element of 20240904BL's testimony involved the fact that she was also placed in Marianville, by her devoutly Catholic adoptive mother, when she became pregnant at 16. This was in the early 1970s. 20240904BL assumes that the nuns at Marianville must have known that her birth mother was next door in the laundry and wonders why they could not have been introduced to each other when she was there to have her own baby. She reflects on the fact that all the women in the various parts of the convent (the mothers-to-be in Marianville and those working in the laundry) were all in the same chapel for Mass each Sunday, although each group had its own segregated area.

“

I was just thinking when I went in and my mother was in the main convent, did the nuns know then that we were related?...I would have liked to have known that. And...I'm just thinking they kept it from me, where I should have known that, that my mother was actually in the same building as I was. So that's a big thing for me.

One of 20240904BL's uncles also gave testimony, and he has the code 20240909EB. He provided more details about his sister, not only because he grew up with her but also because he maintained contact with her once he became aware that she was working in the laundry in Belfast. By this point, he had his own young family and was living in England. He explained his visits to NI.

“

Every time I come, I made it my business to see me sister. I would go to the Home, I would have my tea, take her a ride down to Belfast do a bit of shopping. And then I started the next time I come, I would take her out to her cousins, her aunts. And she really enjoyed it, but I always had to bring her back at night. And I was doing this twice a year, and then near the end I was doing it three times a year, sometimes four.

20240909EB believes that his sister was there 'roughly 43 years but I understand she was let out for a while somewhere during that time'. It is assumed that this period when she was 'let out' was at some point between her first and second pregnancies. At the point of her first pregnancy, he was a teenager and remembers watching his sister leave home with a packed bag, assuming that she was going to a hospital. However, she never returned home.

He learnt of his sister's whereabouts from a cousin and took it upon himself to go and knock on the door of the Good Shepherd Convent. He then met Sister T, who was the nun responsible for supervising his sister's daily life. 20240909EB was positive about this nun, describing her as 'very, nice to me'. However, he received a less open response when he asked about his sister's daughter and son: 'I did mention it to one of the nuns once, I says "These children, could you tell me what happened till them?"' However, he recalled that 'I was told to leave well alone'.

At one point during the 1970s, after the death of one of their brothers in England, 20240909EB asked the GSS if his sister could travel over to visit the grave. He remembered that they 'kept putting it off' but eventually arranged her flight from Belfast and that they 'arranged it, paid her fare and all'. When she arrived on the plane, his sister was well presented.



[She looked like] she was going to Royal Ascot Races, she was that well, she was never as well dressed in her life. She had three outfits, hat and everything. I couldn't, I didn't recognise her. Jeez I said where did you get that gear, you should be going to the races with me to Ascot.

When 20240909EB was invited to a couple of family weddings at home in NI, he accepted on the condition that his sister could attend also. He made it clear that not all of her siblings remained in contact with her, although one sister-in-law 'knitted her some jumpers' and bought her 'underclothes' and instructed her husband to 'take them up to the Home at Christmas'. This couple would go and 'spend an hour [visiting her] but it would only be at Christmas'. 20240909EB recalled that his sister attended at least one wedding and that a 'carer' travelled with his sister to this event and then returned her to the Good Shepherd Convent in the evening.

20240909EB understands that his sister was taken on outings by the GSS: 'I think they took her on holidays a couple of times to Donegal. A coach load of them. I don't know how many went but it was a coach went.' When he visited the convent there were 'maybe twenty or thirty women in there. They were always walking up and down. They all knew me, they'd all wave at you.' After the laundry closed, he remembers his sister working in the garden.



They had a greenhouse, tomatoes, a massive greenhouse and a lovely garden, vegetable garden and her and [name of sister's friend] was in charge of it, and they had their own tea pot in the boiler house for making tea, and if it rained they'd sit in there and I had tea in there several times with them.

His sister offered him some information about her work in the laundry: 'she says sheets, big, long sheets and stuff and folding and ironing and washing, but they would be massive machines wouldn't they?' She also informed him that she did not like 'one or two nuns' but he explained that 'I never asked her why'. When asked if his sister was paid for this work, he replied: 'I never asked her. But she never had any cigarettes I know that.' He also revealed that when their father died, in the early 1960s, each of the siblings inherited £119. His sister's share was placed in her post office savings account book (which he still has), but by 1969 only six pence remained in this account. 20240909EB does not know what happened to that money.

Reflecting on the length of time that his sister remained with the GSS, he has many questions.

“

I just want to know why they didn't let her go at 50 years of age and get a flat for her, because there's plenty of social workers at that time and they would have helped people. And if she was coming out of the Home she would have been homeless and the Housing Executive would have got her some little place to live. Because she could cook and she could wash herself and she could walk about and she must have knew Belfast pretty good, because she could walk around the streets. And I think she would have been able to look after herself with her whatever benefits she was entitled to. At least she would have had freedom, and she could have got on the, there's plenty of transport if she wanted to go to [family's hometown], she could go herself and walk down from the village down to these cousins. And go back in on the evening bus. I can't understand why they didn't do that. Why keep them till they died?

It was explained earlier on that 20240526TB was a schoolgirl living in the Sacred Heart Home in the GSS Convent when one of her relatives was placed in St Mary's, Belfast for what 20240526TB thinks was around two years. Because the Sacred Heart Home was adjacent to the laundry, and as her relative was there, 20240526TB gained some insights on the laundry.

“

I know something about how St Mary's and the Laundry operated through what my relative told me and because its buildings were adjacent to ours, we had some interaction. It was a puzzle why the nuns commonly referred to girls and women there as 'penitents' or why they were called, 'the girls in the class'...especially as many of them were middle aged or elderly. I think some had lived there most of their lives.

One thing that her relative told her correlated with 20250526BL's testimony about burning her hand on some kind of 'ball' in the laundry. 20240526TB was told a 'funny story' by her relative about 'the balls in the Laundry'.

“

These were spheres with steam bursting out of them used to press priests berettas and bishop's hats. When the nuns weren't there, she said they sometimes placed their own bras on top of the balls to iron them.

Her testimony also reiterated what others had to say about the 'trustees' who had a special status in the laundry.

“

In the Laundry, the Child of Mary seemed to attract even more honour and had additional status, signified by wearing a blue (or navy?) uniform. These ‘trustees’ were allowed out to do convent business – to accompany Sacred Heart Home children to school or doctor’s appointments.

20240526TB also explained that she had some opportunities to mix with the women in the laundry during summer outings.

“

Everyone in the Sacred Heart Home and the Laundry was ‘entitled’ to days out in summer (possibly 4–5 days each) to the seaside, like Tyrella Beach. The nuns hired minibuses...which were driven by priests or the laundry man.

Recalling some of the other girls who lived in the Sacred Heart Home, she related that there were two sisters who ‘were sent to visit their mum occasionally in the Newry Laundry’. 20240526TB’s testimony also included commentary on the ‘Magdalens’, the women who had entered one of the GSS St Mary’s institutions and then made a commitment to a life of prayer and silence. 20240526TB explained the significance.

“

Mary Magdalen was represented in convent grounds by a dejected looking statue and there was also a building which was home to about 10 women I perceived as a kind of second-class order of nuns called Magdalens. They wore brown habits, not cream like the Good Shepherd nuns, and took their vows annually not for life. I was told they were women with a religious vocation not allowed to be Good Shepherd nuns. Some were said to have lived in the Laundry or possibly been in Mother and Baby Homes. They made a living baking altar breads sold to parishes and embroidering fancy vestments for the clergy. Their choir sung masses in the Oratory, though aside from that we did not mix.

Echoing the testimony of Ingrid O’Brien, 20240526TB recalled that the girls and women were given sanitary towels ‘cut from old sheets’ and that ‘we embroidered laundry numbers on them before sending off used ones to be washed in the Laundry’. A further testimony from Julieanne Boyle, who waived her right to anonymity, described how she encountered two women who had been relocated from the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast to Purdysburn Hospital, in the 1980s, and how she tried to introduce them to disposable sanitary protection. They were confused by this and continued to wash and reuse their home-made sanitary items.

Concluding her testimony, 20240526TB raised the issue of the absence of National Insurance contributions for those women who had worked in the GSS laundry without any formal recognition by the state of their employment status. She also called for an understanding of the ‘broader social context outside institutions which fostered a culture of silence which played a part in the construction of shame and stigma impacting on the self-esteem of people living there’.

14.0 Where girls and women went when they left St Mary's, Belfast

The records contain no information about where 610 of the girls and women leaving St Mary's went to or if they left at all. Out of the 797 where we do have records of where they went, for 189 (23.7%) it simply recorded 'left' with no further information.

14.1 Girls and women who returned to family or friends when leaving St Mary's, Belfast

The largest group, 196 (24.6%) girls and women, were recorded as going to either friends or family or 'home'. For example, a 14-year-old who was admitted in 1936 and was confined in the laundry for one year had 'father took her home' recorded in her notes. A 37-year-old woman who arrived in St Mary's, Belfast in 1943 remained for ten months, with her notes recording 'left for home' at that point. A 45-year-old woman, who was admitted in 1937, stayed for seven years and was recorded as 'went to her friends in Dublin'.

The language used in some of these instances, such as 'father took her home', indicates the active intervention of a family member was necessary in some cases if a woman was to leave the institution. As the case of 20250527BG illustrates, some of those who entered a St Mary's institution from a mother and baby institution do not appear to have believed that they had any agency in the decision of when they could return to their family and were reliant on an intervention from a relative. 20250527BG was in St Mary's, Belfast for three years, leaving when she was 20 or 21 years old. She explained how she eventually managed to leave the institution.



I was transferred to the Good Shepherd convent where there was a laundry, and I worked there for three years. I couldn't get a letter to my parents to say I wanted home, because each letter you would write would be scrutinised, and I don't know whether they ever got it, but eventually I got a letter smuggled out. Somebody was going out, and they posted the letter. My mother got it. My mother got it and she got the lady, who I used to work for in [name of town redacted], and her son to come and take me home. And I could still be there, but I think it's closed now! So that's, that's what happened.

14.2 Girls and women who left St Mary's, Belfast to take up employment

One hundred and six (13.3%) girls and women left to take up employment. This was often domestic service. For example, a 16-year-old who had been brought to St Mary's, Belfast in 1942, by a priest, remained in the institution for seven years before it was recorded that she was 'sent to a situation in Whiteabbey'. A 27-year-old who had come from Nazareth Lodge was 'sent to a job in the Mater Hospital' in Belfast after spending ten months in St Mary's in 1940. The wording used in instances like these suggest that the GSS continued to arrange employment, often in domestic work, for women who

left the institution. This was something that, as is explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, they had been doing since the nineteenth century.

14.3 Girls and women who were expelled from St Mary's, Belfast

On 22 (2.8%) occasions, a girl or woman was 'expelled' by the GSS, a term that was only used in the 1930s and 1940s. The records provide little detail on what the circumstances were when this happened. One woman who was expelled in 1944 was described simply as 'no good'. A 13-year-old girl who first entered the institution in 1934 was admitted nine times and 'expelled three times'. A 17-year-old girl who was admitted in 1947 had it recorded on her notes that she had been 'expelled' because the GSS viewed her as being 'very very troublesome'. On 20 occasions girls and women were described as 'troublesome', and in each case they did not remain for long in St Mary's, Belfast. This included a 49-year-old woman first admitted in 1938 but who had multiple admission dates after that. Her notes recorded: 'A most troublesome child. Could not keep her more than a few weeks each time.' Four girls and women had notes that stated: 'had to be sent away'; nine girls and women had 'sent away' recorded. One woman who 'had to be sent away' in 1946 was recorded as 'simple' and another who 'had to be sent home after blitz in May 1941' was described as 'very delicate'.

14.4 Girls and women who ran away from St Mary's, Belfast

Thirty-two (4.0%) girls and women were recorded as running away from St Mary's, Belfast. A 16-year-old girl who had been in the institution for a year in the 1950s (exact year redacted) ran away and was then sent to the 'Newry Class'. A 19-year-old, who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted), ran away to England with a 15-year-old girl. Her notes record that she was 'caught and brought back the following day' and was then 'sent back to Dublin', which is where she was from.

For those who were placed in St Mary's, Belfast under a court order, it is likely that the police would have been asked to apprehend them and return them to the institution. In one such case, in the 1960s (exact year redacted), a mother was fined £1 for 'harbouring her daughter' who ran away having been placed there by a court order. The girl had been there for six months before absconding.⁴² In this case, the girl was from Belfast and had the local knowledge to find her way to her mother's house, which was around three miles away. In other cases, those who ran away, but were not from Belfast, appear to have become quickly disorientated. This became clear from the testimony of WB. She spoke about her experience of working with women who formerly laboured in the laundry in St Mary's, Belfast. WB encountered them in the sheltered accommodation in which they lived after the closure of the laundry. WB learnt that these women had 'been sent to the nuns when they were pregnant back in the fifties, sixties, seventies' and had then 'gone to work in the laundry'. In conversations with several of them, WB learnt that at some point in the past they had tried to escape.

“

...they had all tried to escape at one point or other in their early days there, and they'd been either dragged back or come back voluntarily because they'd no money, or their families didn't want them, and they'd nowhere to go, nothing. Nowhere to eat, nowhere to sleep.

One woman had told WB that she had run away off and 'sat in the telephone box', but that a priest and 'a couple of nuns...found her and brought her back'. WB's understanding was that the women's ability to take control of their own destiny was impeded by the fact that they had 'no money and [did not] know what legal situation they were in'. Moreover, none of them were from Belfast and this created further difficulties for them if they did decide to abscond from the convent.

14.5 Girls and women who were transferred to another religious institution from St Mary's, Belfast

Eighty-eight (11.0%) girls and women were recorded as going to another religious institution, with three-quarters going to the GSS in either Derry/Londonderry or Newry. A woman who was admitted in 1940, when she was 18, was 'sent to Newry class' in 1952. No reason was recorded for this transfer. A 16-year-old girl, who had come from St Joseph's Training School in the 1950s (exact year redacted), spent two years in St Mary's, Belfast before being 'sent to Derry class' several years later. An 18-year-old had been brought to St Mary's by Miss 3 (the probation officer) with her notes recording that this was 'on the recommendation of Major Clark, Derry'.⁴³ She had been in prison for breaking into a house and 'ran away three times' from St Mary's, Belfast before 'Miss 3 transferred her to the Good Shepherd Convent Newry'. Four women were recorded as going to 'Gloucester Street, Dublin': this was a Magdalene laundry on what later became Sean McDermott Street. It was operated by the Sisters of Charity and was the last Magdalene laundry in Ireland to close, in 1996.

Twenty girls were transferred to St Joseph's Training School, Middletown.⁴⁴ The first reference to a girl going to St Joseph's was in the 1950s (exact year redacted), when a 16-year-old who was 'sent by the police' stayed ten days in St Mary's, Belfast before being 'sent to Middletown Industrial School'. Her notes also had the word 'troublesome' written. The last reference to anyone being transferred to St Joseph's was in the 1960s (exact year redacted) when a 14-year-old girl who was recorded as being 'unmanageable at home – not coming home at night' ran away from home and was brought by the police to St Mary's, Belfast and was then 'sent to Middletown'.

Most often girls were committed to St Joseph's Training School by a court order,⁴⁵ such as a 15-year-old girl admitted to St Mary's, Belfast in the 1960s (exact year redacted) who was on remand after running away from home. She ran away from St Mary's and the GSS expressed surprise as they noted: 'she maintained she was happy and content here'. It was noted that 'she took another girl with her and they both stayed in a flat with the hippies on Grosvenor Road where they were found by the police'. The court then committed her to St Joseph's.

Ten girls and women went to Marianville and two to Marianvale from St Mary's, Belfast. These included a 15-year-old girl who was 'sent by court' in the 1950s (exact year redacted) and remained for a month at St Mary's before going to Marianville. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl entered St Mary's, Belfast under a court order and was 'sent to Marianville' three weeks later. She then returned to St Mary's in 1962, presumably after the birth of her baby.

Earlier it was explained that Ingrid O'Brien entered St Mary's, Belfast and worked in the laundry after her mother arranged for her transfer from Marianville, following the birth of her second child, who was then adopted. Eventually, other members of Ingrid's family lobbied her mother to agree to Ingrid's release. This was after nine months in the institution. She was first moved to the GSS convent in Waterford and then returned to her family home. Ingrid has learnt why she was taken back.

“

[My youngest brother and sister] had blackmailed my mother into taking me home. I don't know how much longer she intended I should stay there, but they said that you know it wasn't on and Christmas was Christmas, and they had to come and collect me and take me home.

Ingrid was, therefore, another case of an adult woman who was reliant on a parent's intervention before she could leave St Mary's, Belfast.

14.6 Girls and women who left St Mary's, Belfast for medical care

Forty-six (5.8%) girls and women left St Mary's, Belfast for medical care of some kind. For half of these there was no detail of the treatment they were to receive; in many instances only the word 'hospital' was written against their name. There was more detail recorded for the other 23 girls and women, who went to psychiatric hospitals. A woman who was 22 when she was admitted in 1923 had been in St Mary's, Belfast for 21 years when, in 1944, her notes recorded: 'this child got mental and was sent to Asylum'. Apparently, she died shortly afterwards.

A 21-year-old woman was admitted in the 1970s (exact year redacted) and her notes described her as 'an alcoholic' who in the past had been in both Marianville and Marianvale. She left St Mary's, Belfast eight years later 'as a patient in Purdysburn Hospital'. Testimony from Julieanne Boyle, who was a patient in Purdysburn in the 1980s, explained that she had met two women who had been transferred there from the GSS Convent in Belfast.

A girl who was transferred from St Joseph's Training School in the 1960s (exact year redacted) stayed five months in St Mary's, Belfast before she 'was sent to Muckamore'. Her notes describe her as 'very troublesome and had a disturbing effect on the other girls. Sometimes she would not take her food for a whole day.' A 17-year-old girl who had been confined in St Mary's, Belfast under a Fit Person Order in the 1960s (exact year redacted) had, according to her notes, 'swallowed pins and buttons deliberately'. She was sent to the Mater Hospital and then transferred to Muckamore.

14.7 Girls and women who left St Mary's, Belfast to get married

In ten (1.3%) cases it was recorded that women had married when they had left the institution. This included a 33-year-old woman who entered St Mary's, Belfast in the 1960s (exact year redacted). Her notes recorded that she married a man 'who was also employed' in the institution.

14.8 Girls and women who entered and left St Mary's, Belfast multiple times

At least 153 girls and women entered and left St Mary's, Belfast multiple times. Among them was one woman who first entered the laundry in 1906 and exited and entered it 'at least thirteen times'. In another instance, the pattern was very different for a 14-year-old girl who arrived in the institution during 1935 and remained until 1966 before she left. However, she returned three weeks later and stayed for over a year, before leaving a second time to take up a post in a nursing home as a domestic in 1967. Her case is likely an illustration of how long-term institutionalisation made it difficult for women who left to adapt to the world outside the convent and the routine of the laundry. Examples of this type can also be found in a book written in the 1990s with women who had spent several decades in two London Magdalene laundries, which includes accounts of how difficult it was to adjust to life outside in jobs that were low-paid domestic service roles. One elderly woman featured in the London book twice left the laundry, first to work as a domestic and second for employment as a servant to a middle-class family. She returned to the laundry both times because of the miserable and lonely experiences that she had.⁴⁶

14.9 Women who remained on the GSS Convent site when St Mary's, Belfast closed

Some women never left the site of the GSS Convent. St Mary's was registered as a residential home from the late 1970s and by 1992 there were 31 residents in the St Mary's Senior Group Home, which was in the main convent building, spread over three floors. The inspection report by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in 1992 explained that a large part of the property had been sold and that the nuns were moving to a 'nearby Unit'. Part of the land was sold to a Housing Association for a sheltered dwelling complex in which some of the 'more able residents' were to be offered accommodation.⁴⁷ Greenvale Residential Home was also built on the convent site for women needing more support.

The inspection report in 1992 recorded how the average age of the women in the St Mary's Senior Group was 68.4 years and their average length of stay at that point was 37.6 years. Two women had been in the institution for more than 63 years. The report stated that 'most of the residents were admitted or "abandoned" in their early years to the Home due to problematic social backgrounds and left with little or no family or parental contact'. It described the women as a 'self-determining group who exercise their right to come and go as they please, but who totally regard this Home as their own Home and the rest of the group as their family'. It went on to explain that 'by virtue of their situation, this Group has been very institutionalised over the years' and that it was 'a credit to the

Good Shepherd Sisters that a more enlightened perspective has been brought to bear which has effected change in both the living conditions and attitudes of this group'.⁴⁸ The inspection the following year drew similar conclusions, that 'to all of these residents the Convent is the only real Home they know and all of them are institutionalised' but that 'great efforts have been made towards normalisation in recent years, but capacities of residents vary'. It described the women as 'child-like in their enthusiasm to talk and relate to visitors. Some almost curtsy when spoke to'.⁴⁹

The 1992 inspection report commented on the fact that there were 'no written care plans' for the women and that while there is 'some medical or Social Service information available on some of those residents deemed "Special Care" for others [there] is little or nothing'. It explained that 'residents all spoke very highly of the Care they receive in this Home and of the Sisters and staff'. It concluded poignantly that 'the women in themselves...are an unusual group with many of them not even being aware of a previous lifestyle [that] residents in other Homes "mourn"'.⁵⁰

In the late 1950s, 20240904BL's birth mother was transferred to St Mary's, Belfast from Marianville. She remained in the St Mary's Senior Group Home and then moved to the sheltered accommodation. In total, she lived on the Ormeau Road site for almost 40 years. 20240904BL explained what she knows about her birth mother's working life there.

“

...all them years, and she worked, I think she started off working in the laundry. And [when it closed] then they had little bungalows where she maybe shared the bungalow with another female and they were gardening and all then.

20240904BL speculated about why her birth mother remained in St Mary's.

“

There's no right or wrong. For them keeping her there all them years, but maybe there wasn't a place for her to go. Her mother had died and her sister had died... [her] father was still at home, and I don't know who else, maybe it wasn't right for her to go home. Maybe she wouldn't have been, I don't know. But, all them years like we have houses...that were specially built for people coming out of Muckamore [Hospital], but they're supervised in there, but I wondered why didn't they let her out to, you know, to try that. Why was she in there for all them years? She'd no life, she didn't experience anything really, did she? And I don't know...I do think that these institutions need to hold their hands up...And I don't know if my mother was vulnerable before she went in there or did it happen over the years when she was in there.

This is one of several testimonies (others include those of WB and Priest 2, whose testimony features in the chapter on St Mary's, Newry) that asked if the GSS were proactive enough in seeking to move more of the women in their St Mary's institutions to independent living situations. WB encountered the women who had moved to Greenvale

as part of her occupational role and she made several observations. In her view, the women had been ‘institutionalised’ during their very lengthy stays in the laundry. She also noted that one or two of the women ‘had come from outside of the jurisdiction, they’d come from across the border’ and ‘they still had quite strong southern accents as well, despite all their time’.

Social workers engaged with them after they left the GSS Convent to ‘try and recover their original names’. However, WB explained the consequences.

“

[It caused] absolute mayhem; all of a sudden you’re allowed to be called by your original first name, which nobody’s called you for forty years. So, you’ve got used to the new one. So, there’s a sort of pandemonium.

One woman was sent to adult education classes, to learn ‘how to read and write. She couldn’t read and write. She couldn’t count. Not because she, didn’t have the ability, she’d never been taught. She was still illiterate in her seventies.’ Once she had learnt how to read and write, she ‘was very proud of herself’. The women were at different levels in terms of their ability to live ‘with a degree of independence’. There were around 15 Greenvale ‘residents’ during the time WB encountered them and they ranged in age from their late sixties to their early nineties.

WB was raised as a Catholic and understood some of the cultural contexts of the women’s lives.

“

...a lot of them would still be very religious, they’d still see themselves as children of God and, you know, the rules of the Church were right and you have to abide by the rules. Now most of them would have been very, there would have been very little rebellion in them, you know?

Several women had spoken to WB about their pride at the work they had done in the GSS Convent, ‘especially if they were doing any needlework or anything fancy...they’d be very proud’.

“

[They would] describe to you what they did. If they were on ironing and folding, or if they were on stitching, or if they were on boiling, possibly, whatever, and the machinery coming in, the different roles that they had. Or if they were on embroidery or something fancy, or collar work, you know.

WB recalled that the women retained a close relationship with the GSS as they continued to live adjacent to them and they all attended Mass each day. WB even recalled that ‘their whole dress code and all would’ve been very similar to the nuns’. In WB’s opinion the women retained their sense that the nuns ‘were obviously in charge’.

“

Even later in life...when the nuns came [through the] French doors in the main day room, living room, in the residential unit, you know? [the women] would all sit up and tighten their legs, they would all sit up really straight...almost like you would do when you're a child and a strict teacher walks into the class.

Echoing some of the observations from testimonies cited earlier in this chapter, WB noted that the women had internalised deeply the Catholic ideologies that suggested that they were 'sinful' because they had had children before marriage. She discovered this in cases where some of the women received visits from daughters or sons who had been adopted at the point when they were transferred into the St Mary's institution. In some cases, a daughter or son traced them and made visits to Greenvale. WB recalled one woman saying of her son: 'he's the reason why I'm here, that's my sin'. WB maintained that these views 'didn't start when they went to the nuns. That was already ingrained very deeply...they already would have been very faithful members of the Catholic Church.' WB noted: 'the circumstances under which they would have got pregnant, quite often they would have had absolutely no control over', a reference to cases of rape and incest that made accusations of 'sinfulness' even more inappropriate. It was in this context that WB remembers the women being happier to talk about their work in the laundry than about their daughter or son. In fact, 'a lot of them actually dreaded their children coming to see them'.

Reflecting on why the women moved from St Mary's, Belfast to the new 'residential home', WB suggested that they had no option. She explained the dynamics of this.

“

By that stage, when you think about it, say you're twenty years of age, you're pregnant, big shame on the family, massive. You're sent to the nuns, you're there, you're under their control. You're already a practising Catholic, you believe in the wrath of God and all the rules of the Church, and then you're sent to work in the laundry for your sins, and you're let know that, and then you do that all your life, and then the laundry is closed. And they're in this unit that they've lived in all their lives, what, where on earth, where do you go from there? There was nowhere for them to go. Their families are dead, there's nobody left. It's too long ago, it's too late. You can't, you can't fix that.

WB observed that 'if you live all your life in an institution, you've no access to a kettle, never cooking a meal or any of that, then you would not have those skills to cope with life on the outside'. There were 'no independent living skills under the nuns'. From her conversations with the women, WB concluded that the control over them during their years in St Mary's, Belfast was extensive.

“

[They] weren't allowed out. They weren't allowed to look at men. If a man came in to fix the machines they had to turn their, turn their backs and not look, to stare at the wall. They would have had an occasional day out in the summer, maybe.

WB summarised the losses these women faced.

“

[They were] robbed of their independence, they've been robbed of their identity, they've been robbed of their children, they've been robbed of their livelihood, their careers, their life choices, everything.

15.0 Deaths and burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Belfast

Drawing on two sources, there are 95 references to deaths of women who were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast. A significant number of women passed away while in the St Mary's Senior Group Home or Greenvale after 1984. The first source that the Panel used was the admissions registers of St Mary's, where annotations were made against 34 women's names noting the fact of their death. Sometimes the exact date was given and in other instances it was somewhat vague. In addition, as will become clear below, it is obvious that several women died without any record of their death being entered in the admissions registers.

The second source was a list provided in 2019 by the GSS of 80 women known to be interred in the two main Belfast cemeteries, Milltown Cemetery and Belfast City Cemetery. The former is run by the Catholic Diocese of Down and Connor, and the latter is run by Belfast City Council. Hereafter this source is referred to as the GSS' Belfast Burials List.

The GSS' Belfast Burials List recorded 80 burials, but when cross-referenced with the 34 known deaths noted in the admissions registers of St Mary's, what emerges is evidence of unsystematic record-keeping. Eight of the burials from the GSS' Belfast Burials List had not been entered in the admissions registers. Moreover, searches made in the records of Milltown and City cemeteries identified an additional 12 burials which had not been included in the GSS' Belfast Burials List. These amounted to eleven in Milltown and one in City Cemetery.

Having carried out this work, it became apparent that there remain eight deaths of women linked to St Mary's, Belfast for which places of burial have not been identified. These deaths took place in the years 1941, 1947, 1949, 1967, 1982 and 1986. Two further places of burial were impossible to trace because no date of death of any sort had been recorded by the GSS. Furthermore, the searches in the records of the cemeteries indicated that two of the burials which the GSS' Belfast Burials List noted as having occurred in Milltown actually took place in City Cemetery, both in 1989. Among the 80 names on GSS' Belfast Burials List was that of a woman who died in 1957 and whose civil death certificate suggested that she was a nun. It is not clear if her inclusion in the list of burials is an error.

Making sense of the conflicting information drawn from the two sources, what can be said is that of the 95 deaths, 62 women were buried in Milltown Cemetery, 25 in City Cemetery, and the burials of a further eight women remain unaccounted for. Responding to this issue in 2020, the GSS have indicated that some women may not have been on the burial list supplied by them because they were taken home for burial by their families.⁵¹

It has been possible to identify civil death registrations for 81 of these women, all of whom died between 1935 and 2019. For a further 14 women, no death registrations were identified based upon the information available from the GSS sources. In some instances, the information was too vague to allow a death record to be identified. Among those women for whom death certificates were sourced, the youngest died at the age of 21 in 1949, due to tubercular meningitis. However, most other deaths occurred when the women reached their sixties, seventies or eighties. The average age of death for those women for whom a death certificate was identified was 76.

The women who appear on the GSS' Belfast Burials List were buried in a number of plots in Milltown and City cemeteries in Belfast. Those who have died since the 1980s are interred in marked graves with their name and date of death engraved on a headstone: with up to four names on each headstone.⁵² Those buried before the 1980s were placed in larger communal graves that are marked only by a reference to the fact that the grave holds individuals from St Mary's Good Shepherd Convent Belfast and Greenvale Residential Home.⁵³ Responding to these observations about the graves in Milltown and Belfast City Cemetery, the GSS made following comment.

“

All the St Mary's plots now have individual name plaques in place. The residents' burial grave was a large plot with a cement boundary. There was a headstone identifying the grave as Good Shepherd residents. Names were filed on a separate plaque which was renewed in later years to include the names of more residents. In the mid-1990s additional graves were bought in the City Cemetery; individual graves with up to four residents in each and their names inscribed on a headstone.⁵⁴

Death notices in the *Irish News* were checked to ascertain if any of the deaths of these women were marked. For the vast majority of Belfast Catholics, a newspaper death notice would be quite normal in order to inform friends, relatives or associates of funeral arrangements. These notices often included requests for prayers for the soul of the deceased.⁵⁵ This process might have been particularly significant for individual women whose ties to family and friends had been broken by institutionalisation in St Mary's, Belfast. It appears that after 1984 the deaths of women who had been in St Mary's, Belfast were marked by death notices. Prior to that, only one death notice was discovered in relation to one woman's death in 1971.⁵⁶ It seems possible that there was a change in policy in this regard once women left St Mary's, Belfast and were placed in 'residential homes'. Commenting on this matter once they were made aware of it, the GSS suggested that the families of the deceased women 'may not have wanted death notices published. Societal stigmas as regards St Mary's still remained.' They added that the GSS 'dealt with all deaths in an appropriate, dignified and spiritual manner'.⁵⁷

For the 81 women for whom death certificates were identified **Table 3** notes their year of death, age and cause of death.

Table 3: Cause of death of women at St Mary's, Belfast

Year	Age	Cause of Death
1927	84	Senility, six months
1929	72	Carcinoma of breast
1934	85	Bronchitis, myocarditis
1935	28	Ruptured ectopic gestation haemorrhage, cardiac failure
1940	60	Cardiac respiratory failure due to bronchopneumonia due to influenza bronchitis
1941	73	Senility
1942	80	Cerebral haemorrhage due to hypertension
1944	48	Cerebral thrombosis
1947	77	Carcinoma of caecum
1948	21	Bilateral pulmonary tuberculosis
1949	21	Tubercular meningitis
1949	86	1. Coronary thrombosis; 2. Arteriosclerosis
1951	70	Cerebral haemorrhage due to generalised arteriosclerosis
1951	78	1. Cerebral haemorrhage due to generalised arteriosclerosis due to senility; 2. Anaemia
1952	82	1. Cerebral haemorrhage due to atherosclerosis of central arteries; 2. Unrestricted fracture of neck of femur
1952	82	Cerebral haemorrhage due to generality and arteriosclerosis
1954	70	Carcinoma of caecum
1954	70	Carcinoma of stomach
1956	67	1. Gangrene of both feet due to thromboangiitis obliterans; 2. Degeneration of myocardium
1957	48	Acute tracheobronchitis due to (unclear) pulmonary oedema
1958	76	Degeneration of the myocardium due to chronic bronchitis and emphysema
1958	43	Carcinoma of the pancreas
1959	75	Degeneration of the myocardium due to arteriosclerosis

Year	Age	Cause of Death
1959	87	Degeneration of the myocardium due to arteriosclerosis due to senility
1959	62	Coronary thrombosis due to atherosclerosis
1959	75	Degeneration of the myocardium due to arteriosclerosis
1961	67	Bronchopneumonia
1961	74	Reinfarction of myocardium
1962	72	Coronary thrombosis due to arteriosclerosis
1963	62	1. Coronary thrombosis due to atherosclerosis; 2. Essential hypertension
1963	72	Hypostatic pneumonia due to cerebral thrombosis
1964	76	Cardiac asthma
1966	67	Pulmonary embolism due to...vein thrombosis due to...
1967	74	Degeneration of the myocardium due to arteriosclerosis of the coronary arteries
1971	74	Left ventricular failure due to degeneration of myocardium due to arteriosclerosis of coronary arteries
1971	35	Bilateral pulmonary emboli
1973	69	Acute myocardial infarction
1974	61	Carcinoma of right breast with secondaries
1974	93	Congestive cardiac failure, ischaemic heart disease, senile arteriosclerosis
1977	77	1. Myocardial infarction, ischaemic heart disease; 2. Atherosclerosis
1978	75	1. Myocardial infarction, atherosclerosis of coronary arteries; 2. Cerebral atherosclerosis
1979	88	1. Congestive cardiac failure; 2. Atherosclerosis of coronary arteries
1980	70	1a. Acute myocardial infarction
1982	81	1a. Lobar pneumonia, 1b. Left-side cerebrovascular accident; 2. Right-side cerebrovascular accident
1982	72	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease
1984	85	1. Bronchopneumonia, cerebrovascular accident, renal failure; 2. Carcinoma of bowel
1985	53	Widespread metastatic disease, adenocarcinoma of colon

Year	Age	Cause of Death
1985	76	1. Cardiac arrest, acute myocardial infarction; 2. Right-side hemiplegia
1985	73	1. Myocardial infarction, atherosclerosis; 2. Diabetes
1986	84	1a. Bronchopneumonia
1987	81	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. Immobility, 1c. Osteoarthritis
1987	89	Bronchopneumonia, immobility
1989	79	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. immobility, 2. Dementia
1989	78	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. Acute-on-chronic renal failure
1989	82	1a. Congestive cardiac failure, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Renal failure
1989	80	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. Immobility, 1c. Senile dementia
1990	79	1a. Lobar pneumonia, 1b. Chronic obstructive airways disease; 2. Congestive heart failure (certified)
1990	86	1a. Metastatic carcinoma, 1b. Carcinoma of breast
1991	81	1a. Cryptogenic liver cirrhosis
1992	90	1a. Gastrointestinal haemorrhage, 1b. Gastric ulcer; 2. Bronchopneumonia
1993	73	1a. Congestive cardiac failure, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Carcinoma of caecum
1993	73	1a. Myocardial infarction; 2. Heart failure, atrial fibrillation
1994	77	1a. Bronchopneumonia; 2. Renal failure
1996	75	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Osteoporosis
1996	75	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Osteoporosis

Year	Age	Cause of Death
1996	76	1a. Disseminated breast carcinoma
1997	74	1a. Congestive heart failure, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Cerebrovascular disease hypertension (certified)
1997	75	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. Ischaemic heart disease; 2. Diabetes and asthma
1999	89	1a. Liver metastases, 1b. Primary site unknown
2000	86	1a. Septicaemic shock, 1b. Pneumonia and urinary tract infection; 2. Hyperosmolar non-ketotic hyperglycaemia
2001	91	1a. Dissection of thoracic/abdominal aortic aneurysm; 2. Angina (coroner's statement)
2001	64	1a. Pneumonia
2003	81	1a. Acute renal failure, 1b. Retroperitoneal haemorrhage; 2. Bronchopneumonia
2006	94	1a. Bronchopneumonia
2007	92	1a. General debility of old age
2012	88	1a. Small bowel obstruction, 1b. Gastric cancer (certified)
2012	94	1a. General old age debility (certified)
2012	88	1a. Pulmonary oedema and right lobar pneumonia, 1b. Congestive cardiac failure; 2. Dementia, Type 2 diabetes mellitus, asthma
2014	77	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. Bronchopneumonia
2016	75	1a. Gastrointestinal bleeding, 1b. Large duodenal ulcer, (chronic) kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, learning difficulties, heart failure
2019	86	1a. Urosepsis, 1b. Endometrial and breast cancer; 2. Dementia, learning difficulties, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, Type 2 diabetes, monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance

15.1 Civil death registration of girls and women from St Mary's, Belfast

The occupations recorded on the 81 death certificates identified for the women are as listed in **Table 4**. The vast majority record an occupation linked to the laundry, while a minority appear to note the occupation of some women before they had been admitted to St Mary's, Belfast. In particular, this is demonstrated in the cases where the following occupations were recorded. For the majority, their occupations suggest they were seen as unpaid 'employees' of the institution.

Table 4: Occupations of women at St Mary's, Belfast

Occupation	No.
Coat finisher	1
Domestic servant	8
Farmer labourer	1
French polisher	1
Housekeeper/house duties	10
Laundry worker	39
Not recorded on death certificate/unknown	12
Nun	1
Pensioner	1
Seamstress	5
Voluntary worker	1
Widow	1

All the women were recorded as single, other than one who died in 1967, who was recorded as the widow of an ex-serviceman.

15.2 Burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Belfast

Using St Mary's, Belfast admission registers and the GSS' Belfast Burials List the information set out in Table 5 has been established regarding the burial locations for 87 of the 95 women. For more information about the particular burial grounds, see the deaths and burials section in the Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy and Legal Services chapter. The records show:

Table 5: Burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Belfast

Location	No.
Milltown Cemetery, Belfast	62
Belfast City Cemetery	25
Buried by family	2
Burial location not established	6

One of those who gave testimony to the IP had experience of a funeral arranged by the GSS. 20240909EB calculates that his sister spent 43 years living under the supervision of the GSS after she gave birth to two children outside marriage in the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s that he realised that she was in St Mary's, Belfast, and he visited her on his regular trips home from England. When his sister died, her funeral took place in the chapel next door to the Good Shepherd Convent. It was paid for by the GSS after some discussion with 20240909EB.

“

...she had a very nice funeral, and it was all paid for, it didn't cost me, the Home paid for it. I did mention it to her [Sister T], I said 'who's paying for this?' Because if we had to do it, I was going to get the rest of the family in, I wasn't going to pay for it all on my own. But I would have done if there was nobody else. And Sister T said 'it's all arranged, but if you want to pay for it you can do'. And I said 'Well if you've arranged it, you carry on and do it. You had her service for 40 years, she earned it.'

After interment at the Belfast City Cemetery, the mourners returned to the GSS Convent for refreshments. Family members and former neighbours then returned to a pub in their home village to continue the proceedings. 20240909EB described it as 'a very big funeral'.

The daughter of 20240909EB's sister also gave testimony. Her code is 20240904BL. She explained that she has visited her birth mother's grave on two occasions, observing that work has been carried out on it in recent years. When she visited the grave, 20240904BL noted that it was one big plot with one headstone, 'but there was no individual names. I suppose they would have run out of room [for all the names on one headstone].' However, she added: 'when myself and my daughter went up last year (2023), they were all individual headstones, so there was like four names on each'. 20240904BL also noted that the occupational details on her birth mother's death certificate read: 'laundress, convent, retired'. Assessment of the death certificates for women who died while still living in one of the three GSS St Mary's institutions invariably had an occupation listed as 'laundress' or something similar.

16.0 Conclusion

This assessment of St Mary's, Belfast indicates that it functioned in similar ways to the Magdalene laundries that were operated by the GSS and other religious orders in RoI. It was an institution that accommodated a multigenerational and complex range of girls and women who were referred to the GSS by state agents, such as welfare committees, the Special Care Committee, police officers and probation officers, members of the clergy and other religious orders, and the families of the girls and women involved. In a small minority of cases girls and women presented themselves at St Mary's, Belfast to seek crisis accommodation.

These girls and women included (among others) those on probation, girls and women who were admitted as 'special care' cases, teenage victims-survivors of incest or rape, individuals with alcohol dependency and without family support, individuals fleeing abusive partners, young women who were sent to 'the class' after they had given birth outside of marriage, and girls and young women identified as being in 'moral danger'. This wide spectrum of individuals admitted in St Mary's, Belfast was in keeping with the GSS' principle that no one deemed to be in need should be turned away by the Order.

The HIAI heard evidence that the St Mary's institutions operated a regimented culture and repetitive work regime. This was particularly true for the period before the mid-1960s when few of the Sisters had social work qualifications. In evidence to the HIAI the GSS explained how their policy was to offer mentorship and support for girls and women in the St Mary's institutions. This aim seems at odds with the policy of renaming new arrivals, imposing silence during meals and punishing infringements of rules in 'a cruel and demeaning fashion' as concluded by the HIAI.⁵⁸

The evidence indicates that the regime in the St Mary's institutions and their laundries became more benign from the late 1960s onwards as the result of factors that included the impact of more liberal Catholic ideology, following the Second Vatican Council, plus increasing financial support from the welfare state. It is clear, for example, that the GSS dropped the practice of giving 'class' names to new arrivals in 1970. The women who worked in the St Mary's laundries began to receive modest amounts of 'pocket money' during the 1970s, which they could spend on themselves. There were also increased educational opportunities, mainly in the form of evening classes, which enabled some women to spend time away from the convent. These were improvements on the conditions experienced by the previous generations of St Mary's women. However, life in the St Mary's institutions was still comparatively regulated and restricted.

The testimony shared with the Panel about St Mary's, Belfast raised concerns about unpaid labour and questioned why some women remained within the confines of the St Mary's institutions for many decades. Women who experienced life in the laundries, such as Ingrid O'Brien, described the fear they felt about their fate; they wondered if they were set to remain in the St Mary's institution for decades like some of the elderly women they encountered around them. Others who shared their testimony expressed concerns about why their mothers or their sisters had been sent into this institution and why, in some cases, they never left it. Many of the testimonies identify a punitive element in the decision to send a girl or woman to St Mary's, Belfast and discuss the roles of other family members, priests or social workers in arranging this with the GSS.

To varying degrees, all the testimonies regret that the laundry regimes existed in the form in which they did. This includes the testimonies of Sister 1 and Sister 2 which express the GSS' remorse that, in their view, there was no economic alternative to girls and women working unpaid in the laundries. There were also much more critical views that bluntly describe the system as being a fundamentally exploitative practice. The chapter on Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries explained that concerns about the financial and economic model operated in the GSS laundries have been debated since at least the 1890s. However, there is no evidence that the state in NI gave sustained consideration to these matters even though it benefited from their existence. This was obviously apparent during World War Two when the GSS laundries in St Mary's, Belfast and Derry/Londonderry were called upon to help the war effort by laundering military uniforms. More mundanely, the St Mary's institutions accommodated girls and women on behalf of numerous wings of the state.

This chapter also returned to the HIAI report and how it highlighted concerns about several aspects of the regime that existed in the St Mary's institutions. It identified cases that signify that they were an inappropriate destination point for young girls and for the victims of sexual abuse. The evidence collected by the Panel suggests that many of the concerns raised by the HIAI were likely to have been equally relevant in terms of all categories of St Mary's institution 'residents'. Moreover, the data presented here suggests that 41.2% of entrants to St Mary's, Belfast were under 18: a more significant number than the HIAI assumed to be the case. While it appears that those under 15 were housed in the Sacred Heart Home, the majority will have worked in the laundry under the conditions critiqued by the HIAI.

The Sisters themselves expressed regret about the laundries but argue that their existence was the result of a lack of state funding for many of the girls and women who were placed in the St Mary's institutions. They also maintain that the women in these institutions lived mainly happy lives. The majority of testimonies discussed here differ from that perspective. Those from women who spent time in this institution do not report physical abuse, but they do record their sense of being incarcerated and their uncertainty about how, or if, they would ever leave the institution. Moreover, Ingrid O'Brien's recollection about electroconvulsive therapy may well be an issue that the public inquiry will want to investigate if her medical records from this time can be sourced. The public inquiry may also need to carry out further searches for burial certification and burial details for the small number of women linked to St Mary's, Belfast for whom they have proved to be untraceable to this point.

17.0 Addendum

The register covering the period 1922–32 for St Mary's, Belfast was provided to the IP by the GSS too late for inclusion in the main chapter. We were able to include them only in **Figure 1**, which indicates the total numbers of girls and women admitted between the 1920s and 1980s. However, in this addendum the Panel provides brief analysis on the new records covering 1922–32. The headline statistical findings are set out below.

17.1 How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Belfast

Length of stay was recorded for 186 of the 253 girls and women admitted between 1922 and 1932, as shown in **Table 6**.

Table 6: Length of stay for girls and women at St Mary's, Belfast 1922–32

Length of stay	No.
Less than one month	14
1–12 months	114
1–2 years	42
2–10 years	16

There were four recorded deaths in these years, but full names were only recorded on two occasions allowing for death registrations to be identified. One woman who was in her 20s when admitted in 1923 died 10 months after admission from tuberculosis, which she had been diagnosed with for six months. A 20-year-old woman admitted the following year died 18 months later in 1926 also from tuberculosis which she had been diagnosed with for just one month before her death. Tuberculosis rates were higher in Belfast than other cities on the island of Ireland and rates were higher for women than men. It was particularly associated with the linen industry where large numbers of young women worked. It is not clear if these two women worked in the linen industry as their occupations were recorded as dressmaker and domestic servant. It is also unclear if they were unwell prior to admission to St Mary's, Belfast, and if this was linked to their admission.

17.2 What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Belfast

Ages were recorded for 252 of the 253 additional girls and women, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Age of girls and women at St Mary's, Belfast 1922–32

Age	No.
15 and under	13
16–17	29
18–21	63
22–29	89
30–39	26
40–49	20
Over 50	12

17.3 Where did girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast come from

A recorded address was only given for 104 of the 253 girls and women in the register. The pattern was similar to other time periods with 47 (45.2%) Belfast addresses.

Table 8: Address of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Belfast 1922–32

Location	No.
Belfast	47
Co Down	16
Derry/Londonderry	11
Antrim	5
Tyrone	3
Armagh	2
Republic of Ireland	15
England/Scotland	3
No fixed abode	2

17.4 Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast

How girls and women were referred to St Mary's, Belfast between 1922 and 1932 was recorded in 227 of 253 cases, as shown in **Table 9**.

Table 9: Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Belfast 1922–32

Source	No.
Self-referral	75
Family	56
Religious orders	36
Clergy	22
Courts	20
Named individuals	16
Belfast Workhouse	2

Of the named individuals who were not recorded as being related to the woman or girl being admitted, 11 admissions were by a Winifred Cosgrove. She is discussed in the Baby Institutions chapter for her work with St Joseph's Babies' Home, which brought her before the courts on several occasions. The girls and women she referred to St Mary's may well have been women who had children outside of marriage. It is also possible that Cosgrove had placed their children with nurse mothers or in St Joseph's (see the Baby Institutions chapter for details about Cosgrove's controversial work).

There were no reasons given in the registers as to why girls and women had been admitted.

Chapter 3

The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's
Institution and Laundry, Derry/Londonderry



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** Sources used in writing this chapter
- 2.0** Historical background to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 3.0** What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 4.0** How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 5.0** How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 6.0** Women who never left St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 7.0** What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 8.0** Teenage girls admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 9.0** Where did girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry come from
- 10.0** What was the religious background of the girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 11.0** Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 12.0** What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 13.0** What was daily life like in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 14.0** Where girls and women went when they left St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 15.0** Deaths and burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry
- 16.0** Conclusion

Readers' advisory

Readers of this chapter are reminded that when quoting from historical records, newspaper reports and other contemporary sources, it is necessary to use the terminology and language that was used at the time. The Panel is aware that such terms can be upsetting and unacceptable and that they would not be used today. These terms are used as little as possible in all the chapters of this report but may appear in quoted sections. It is important to make the point that institutional records and reports are reflective of the creator's viewpoint and should not be considered conclusive nor definitive of the practices and processes of the institution. Nor should they be considered to be evidential or impartial in relation to the institutions themselves or the girls and women who were admitted to them. This report discusses issues that readers will find upsetting. These include subjects such as incest, rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, family separation and poor mental health.

In terms of testimonies, when speaking about their personal history, some individuals quote the terms that were derogatorily used about them or their children in the past. We will quote these terms as they appear in the testimonies cited.

The written records relating to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry present a partial account of the institution, how it was run, and the lives of the girls and women who stayed there. The lack of detail captured in short case notes on the individual girls and women who entered the institution leaves numerous questions either partially answered or not addressed at all. This is particularly true in terms of the emotional inner lives and family details of the pregnant girls and women who entered the institution. Recording testimonies from some of those women takes us beyond the brevity and formulaic information that is offered in the archival sources. At times, the testimonies offer very contrasting perspectives on the nature and functions of this institution to those suggested by written records.

1.0 Sources used in writing this chapter

The GSS made available to the Independent Panel (IP) a significant amount of admissions material in relation to this St Mary's institution. This was:

- two admissions registers
- 167 admission index cards
- one volume of admission notes
- 171 admission files.

Testimony has been taken from three main sources:

- testimony shared with the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) as cited in its report¹
- testimony shared with the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) report of 2021²
- testimony shared with the Panel.

2.0 Historical background to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The historical background to all three GSS St Mary's institutions in Northern Ireland (NI) is detailed in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries. The GSS came to Derry/Londonderry in 1919 after they purchased land on Dungiven Road in the Waterside district of the city. Their laundry in the convent was established by October 1921. It closed in 1982, and the St Mary's institution closed to new admissions in 1984. St Mary's Residential Home for women who remained in the institution operated until 1994, when residential and sheltered accommodation opened on the grounds.



St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, photo supplied and permission to use from private collection

Unlike the GSS convents in Belfast and Newry, there was no mother and baby institution on the site. There was a Sacred Heart Home that accommodated school-age girls, which functioned between 1936 and 1952. Between 1975 and 1984 Bellevue Hostel operated. It accepted teenagers who were placed by social services, as well as providing accommodation for student nurses and others who worked locally.

3.0 What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Limited financial records were available relating to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. They indicate that the laundry did not record a profit in most of the period between 1920 and 1940. However, the years of World War Two brought lucrative military contracts which resulted in a major increase in profits. In 1938, the laundry generated a total income of £4,119, 11 shillings and 6 pence (the equivalent of about £380,000 today). In 1942, this had more than doubled to £11,437, 8 shillings and 3 pence (the equivalent of about £780,000 today).³ Figures from a Ministry of Commerce report from September 1942 indicate that between 60 and 70 girls and women were working unpaid in the laundry.⁴

The GSS St Mary's institutions had other forms of income in addition to money that was made from the laundry. Finances were raised from needlework and embroidery carried out in the sewing room. One example of this work was revealed in 1940, when the *Derry Journal* told its readers that the Derry Gaelic Athletic Association team were to play Sligo wearing a new team shirt with a crest 'artistically done by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd Convent'.⁵

Girls and women in the St Mary's institution also worked on the small farm and garden in the convent. In 1935, produce from these earned £219, 1 shilling and 10 pence. Christmas gifts and charitable donations were also sources of income and generally contributed several hundred pounds each year. In 1923, for example, the proceeds of a bazaar came to £1,055.

As the convent became more established, several affluent Catholics left money in their wills. The sums involved ranged from £10 to £100 between 1922 and 1948. However, the level of detail recorded on these legacies in the Good Shepherd records varies from year to year and often provides limited detail. For example, in 1925 the *Belfast Telegraph* noted a bequest of £100 (£4,100 in today's terms) from the will of Robert McAlister, a Justice of the Peace, yet the Good Shepherd's accounts for that year simply record 'charity – £237.1s.1d'. However, individual bequests from four other individuals are identified in the 1927 accounts, ranging from £20 to £300 (the latter being equivalent to £12,300 in value today). These donations continued over the years: in 1959, for example, Alexander Donnelly, the former Nationalist MP for West Tyrone left £100 (£3,100 in value today) to the Good Shepherd Convent in Derry which was home to the St Mary's institution.⁶

The available financial records also recorded an income stream listed under 'pensions', which it is assumed were received on behalf of the women living in the St Mary's institution who had reached the state retirement age.

The financial records also include the outgoings of this institution. Typical expenditure involved insurance, taxes, plus the costs of laundry supplies, sacristy⁷ and pharmacy supplies. In 1935, £1,165, 2 shillings and 5 pence were spent on food for the convent's occupants while a further £305, 4 shillings and 10 pence were spent on clothing. The income and expenditure for 1935 can be seen in **Table 1**. The total income and outgoings for 1935 can be converted, respectively, to £391,000 and £404,000 in today's values.

Table 1: Income and expenditure at St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in 1935

Income	£.s.d	Expenditure	£.s.d
Laundry	3182.16.4	Rent	7.10.5
Pensions	40.2.6	Insurance/tax	289.0.0
Dividend	40.10.0	Sacristy	158.9.0
Charity	132.11.9	Pharmacy	28.0.6
Appeal	92.4.8	Food	1,165.2.5
Gifts	336.14.2	Clothing	305.4.10
Bequests	10.10.0	Fuel/lighting	1,542.18.0
Donations	10.10.0	Repairs	335.3.0
Garden/farm	209.1.10	Garden/farm wages	354.19.1
Total	4,055.1.3	Total	4,186.7.6

Table 2 demonstrates the impact of the contracts negotiated during World War Two by the GSS for laundering items from military personnel. The table charts expenditure and income between 1937 and 1948, indicating that a cumulative profit of £13,859 (the equivalent of approximately £600,000 today) was achieved between 1941 and 1947. Assuming that the surviving financial records accurately record all financial income and expenditure, the institution began making a profit in 1941 and continued to do so until 1947. A small profit of £133, 19 shillings and 7 pence was made in 1946; and £141, 9 shillings and 8 pence in 1947; falling to £43, 9 shillings and 1 pence in 1948. It was not possible to calculate annual profit and losses after 1949 because the surviving records do not allow this, although some correspondence does provide insights into financial matters.

Table 2: Financial records of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry 1937–48⁸

Year	Income (£)	Expenditure (£)
1937	5,841	6,545
1938	5,679	7,296
1940	5,657	6,859
1941	9,639	9,599
1942	12,307	10,691
1943	14,070	11,019
1944	16,868	11,588
1945	15,841	11,969
1946	14,835	14,701
1947	14,455	14,314
1948	15,364	15,588

After World War Two, with the establishment of the welfare state, the GSS received regular payments to meet the living costs of girls and women in the St Mary's institution from the state. By 1973, payments from welfare committees had risen to £8 per week. A 14-year-old was sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by Fermanagh Welfare Committee that year and this charge was noted in the entry register. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 15-year-old was placed by the Omagh Welfare Committee, which made payments totalling £90, 17 shillings and 2 pence during her placement in St Mary's. In their closing statement to the HIAI, the GSS observed that sums received for 'girls' sent to the St Mary's institutions in NI were not always sufficient to cover the cost of maintaining an individual in one of the institutions. It cited an example, from 1963, where the welfare authority payment was £2 and 10 shillings per week for the maintenance of a teenage girl, whereas the GSS calculated that £5 was a more realistic cost.⁹ That this financial contribution did increase eventually is evidenced by the recording of £5 in the notes of a number of women who were in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1960s.

3.1 What does St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry tell us about Magdalene laundries, their finances and their unpaid workforce?

There has been an extensive discussion about the income of Magdalene laundries and their financial status, which has revolved principally around whether or not they made significant profits. If they did generate regular extensive surpluses, then critics of the whole system would see that as further evidence of exploitation of the girls and women who laboured without pay month after month and year after year in the laundries. As was explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, this is not a new debate. In the late nineteenth century questions were asked about the ethics of operating commercial laundries using the unpaid labour of girls and women who, in most cases, had been sent to the institution.

The GSS laundries and how they operated has been the subject of ethical scrutiny since at least the 1890s. This included questions being asked about the decision to not pay wages to those who laboured in the GSS laundries. There were also concerns that the fact that the GSS economic model was based on the requirement for the laundries to turn a profit provided a disincentive for the nuns to encourage girls and women who had proved useful in the laundry to leave the convent. Despite these concerns, when the UK established rates of pay for female laundry workers in 1919 through the Laundry Trade Board, it accepted the argument that convent laundries were established for religious and philanthropic purposes and that those labouring in them were not employees in the conventional understanding.¹⁰ This is an argument that the GSS reiterate. They maintain that in lieu of wages, girls and women in their St Mary's institutions worked in the laundry in return for 'food, shelter and pastoral support'. Moreover, they argue that in many cases, the only alternative many of them had was homelessness. The GSS reject suggestions that relying on the laundry as a source through which each GSS convent and its work was sustained provided an economic incentive for the Sisters to retain girls and women within the institution. They argue that the statistics on length of stay in each St Mary's institution demonstrate that the majority of girls and women left within 12 months.¹¹ The figures for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry are presented below and the equivalent figures for the Belfast and Newry St Mary's institutions can be found in the relevant chapters. The GSS laundry in Derry/Londonderry and its workforce came to the government's attention during World War Two when it was awarded contracts to carry out the laundry of Allied military personnel based in the city. The laundry was surveyed by the Ministry of Commerce in 1942, and while its report commented on the technology and washing capacity that was available it remained silent about the 76 unpaid girls and women who were working in the laundry.¹² However, trade union representatives and management representatives from other commercial laundries in Derry/Londonderry did highlight this issue. A representative of the National Union of General Municipal Workers asked 'whether Convent laundry wages were governed by Trade Board Regulations'. If so, he continued: 'such laundries should be asked to observe them'. As was explained earlier the Laundry Trade Board had, in 1919, concluded that convent laundries should not be subject to its minimum wage requirements. Stormont officials appear to have not followed up this concern even though the union's complaint was echoed by a representative of the Laundry Owners' Association who alleged that the 'Good Shepherd Convent Laundry in Londonderry had under-cut prices for both civilian and military contracts'.¹³

Correspondence held by the GSS further highlights this issue, with a letter from the Ulster Launderers' Association to Rev. Mother at St Mary's Derry/Londonderry in 1944 discussing a surcharge that was to be added to prices. The letter explained that the Good Shepherd laundry in Belfast had agreed to the increase and that they felt sure they could rely on the GSS in Derry/Londonderry 'to adopt the new prices'.¹⁴ However, this optimism was misplaced and a month later a letter from a solicitors in Belfast, who had represented the GSS in the 1920s regarding pricing arrangements, told how they had been visited by a representative from the Ministry of Labour as the Launderer's Association had complained about the GSS' 'unwillingness to charge the increased rates'. They advised the Sisters to 'reconsider their position' and to speak to 'some of the older nuns' who had been at GSC Belfast in 1923 and who could verify the 'understanding then reached'.¹⁵ The response from the GSS in Derry/Londonderry was to explain that the 'bulk' of their washing was 'Service: British and United States' to which the surcharge would not apply. In addition, they stated that as their civilian work was

'principally Industrial Class' they would 'hesitate to raise' prices. They also explained that 'we have not here in Derry – well-to-do customers!' so an increase in charges 'would not seem advisable'. The letter went on to say that they had no recollection of any negotiations in the 1920s and that the laundry at St Mary's Derry/Londonderry would only recently have been established then, and asked if they could be sent any documentation regarding the 'Belfast-Derry arrangement'.¹⁶ The response explained that any deal had been done by a now deceased solicitor but their recollection was that there was 'an agitation for the inspection of Convent Laundries and to bring them under the control of the Government'. With a 'view to disposing of the opposition' an arrangement was made that 'as far as possible Trade Union regulations would be observed in the Convent laundries so that there might be no undercutting'. They suggested that 'at the time one of the grievances of the Commercial Laundries was that the Convents had cheap labour and that labour was exploited to the disadvantage of the Commercial Laundries paying Trade Union wages'. The letter concluded by suggesting that if the GSS 'did not fall into line' it could lead to 'not only a difficult situation for yourselves but also for the Convent in Ballynafeigh' as 'for years by reason of the observance of the arrangement...there has been no agitation for the inspection of Laundries etc'.¹⁷ A response by the GSS in April suggested they might consider an increase in prices providing they could 'discontinue at any time it might seem advisable', and did not feel that this was a matter 'upon which pressure would be brought to bear'; they also pointed out that they were not members of any 'particular Association'.¹⁸ The solicitor's reply reiterated that 'unless there is a very strong reason for not doing so, we would advise you to keep in line with the charges of other laundries, because if you do not, you may have to face an agitation in Derry similar to what happened in Belfast'.¹⁹ This suggests again that, if they did resist, there would be a push to inspect the laundries, an indication that the Convent Laundries had not been inspected to this point in a deal to not undercut the commercial laundries. A few days later the GSS replied that they would adopt the increase but explained that their hesitation had been around being 'aligned in any way with Associations'.²⁰

This question was reopened early in the current century as part of the shift towards investigating historical institutional abuses. The McAleese Report's investigation of Magdalene laundries in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) concluded that they 'were operated on a subsistence or close to break-even basis rather than on a commercial or highly profitable basis'.²¹ Academic James Smith has queried this aspect of the McAleese Report based on his research on the Galway Magdalene Laundry operated by the Sisters of Mercy. He concludes it was much more financially profitable than the McAleese investigators appreciated and observes that finances were raised through donations, bequests and collections.²² Smith's significant concerns were among numerous criticisms of Ireland's Magdalene laundries that drew international attention, including from the United Nations Committee against Torture.²³ This international focus was a crucial factor that led to the establishment of the McAleese Committee in RoI and, slightly later, the Interdepartmental Working Group in NI.

The exploration of the financial records made available in relation to the three GSS laundries in NI suggests that profits were limited. However, the accounts available for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry for 1973 reveal it held bank reserves of £41,000 (the equivalent of approximately £600,000 today). Over £1,000 was earned that year from interest on investments made by the GSS. It is not possible to assess whether

this money was accumulated over several decades or whether there were particularly rewarding financial periods, other than World War Two, during which the GSS increased their cash reserves.

As was seen in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries the testimonies of Sister 1 and Sister 2 both repeated the GSS viewpoint that any profits made from the laundry were necessary to cover the costs of feeding, clothing and housing the girls and women who worked there. From their perspective it was a regrettable necessity, as Sister 2 put it: 'you kind of wish it was different but look it was part of the story at the time. It was worldwide, it wasn't just in Ireland, it was worldwide, you know?' Sister 1 and Sister 2 maintained that once state grants to the GSS increased in the 1970s, payments of 'pocket money' were made and there was a growing focus on education and training outside the laundry work.

In 1970 an inspector from the Western Health and Social Services Board interviewed the Reverend Mother of the GSS in Derry/Londonderry about the running of the laundry. The notes of the interview stated that the 'occupants of the Home in L'derry fall into such categories as: mentally defective, mentally sub-normal, socially inadequate, low IQ, deformed, welfare cases, bad leg veins and so on'. It went on that 'in the main the girls and women would be unemployable in outside industry. Some are successfully rehabilitated and leave the Home for employment. Others have been out of the Home but have had to return due to inability to cope with life outside.' The Reverend Mother explained to the inspector that 'eighty girls and women in the Home could not just be kept standing around, so as a means of occupational therapy and also to maintain them, the Home started the laundry many years ago'. It was recorded that 14 Sisters helped in the laundry and seven men were employed, six as 'van men' and one for maintenance. However, while the men were employed and paid for the work and appropriate contributions paid, for 'the inmates of the Home, 67 girls and women help in the laundry...this is treated as occupational therapy and to assist in their maintenance, and not as employment'. The notes go on to state: 'as there is no employment no I.I. contributions [class 2 National Insurance] are paid', and as there was 'no employment' there was 'no question of dismissal'. It was explained that all the women received board and lodgings in addition to pocket money which ranged from 10 shillings a week for 'new inmates' to two pounds a week for 'older inmates'. It was further explained that 'pocket money is not for services rendered – all the inmates receive pocket money whether they work or not' and in addition 'all inmates are also provided with clothing, unless they wish to buy their own'.

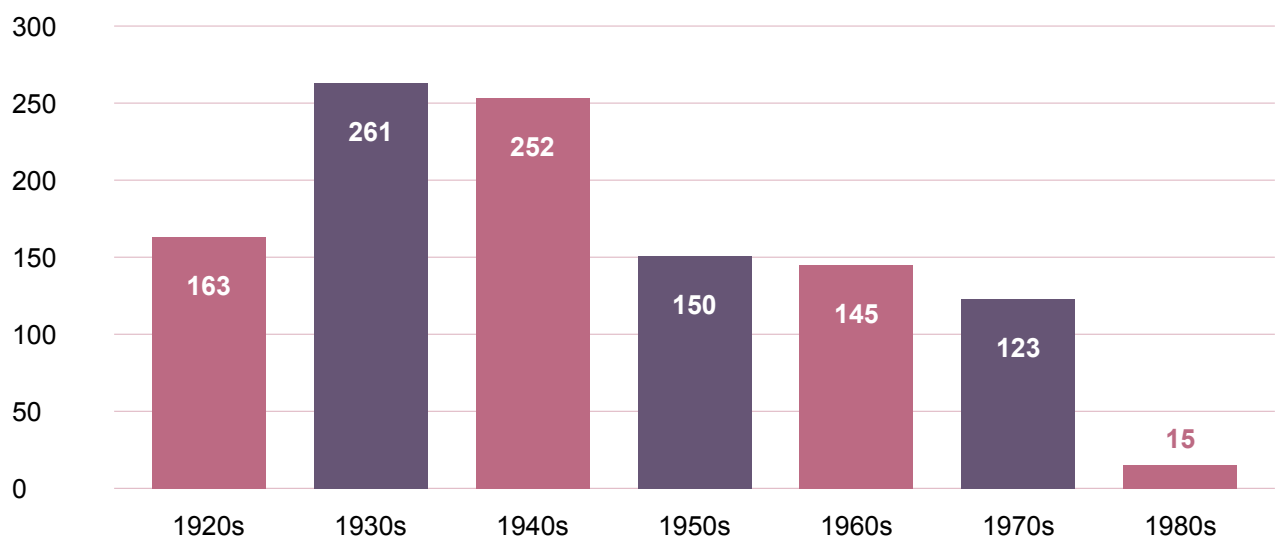
The Reverend Mother also informed the inspector that to avoid undercutting outside laundries she had obtained a list of their charges and 'keeps the Good Shepherds to the same level'.²⁴ That the GSS Laundry should not be considered as a commercial enterprise had been emphasised four years earlier in a letter to the Ministry of Commerce in which the Reverend Mother had explained that it was 'entirely subordinate to the purpose of the convent, which is the moral welfare and re-education of girls'. She went on to explain that 'the laundry provides these girls with work on a part-time and non-commercial basis; the work being designed in part to assist their training in the elements of order and discipline as well as to provide some skills that will be useful in their future'.²⁵

A laundry manager was appointed in 1976 and the laundry was then run on a commercial basis, and by 1979 employed 20 girls and women from outside the convent, but 'still provide[d] a source of interest for the long-term residents' with around one-third playing 'an active part in the work of the laundry'.²⁶ The laundry closed in 1982 and a document on the transition period following the closure of the laundry explained that it was a 'time of shock, uncertainty and loneliness' for 'residents' for whom the 'Laundry had been their way of life'. Some of the women who it was considered were 'capable of light household cleaning' were 'introduced to suitable families living nearby where they work for a few hours each week', though it was not recorded if they were paid for this work. The document went on to state that 'gradually they have grown accustomed to their new lifestyle and keep occupied in doing normal light household duties'.²⁷

4.0 How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Between 1922 and 1984, 1,151 girls and women were recorded as entering St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. For the 1,109 women whose entry dates were recorded, the highest number of admissions was in the 1930s, with numbers gradually declining to 15 in the 1980s, seven of whom were women who transferred from the GSS St Mary's institution in Newry when it closed in 1984. The number of admissions per decade for which a date was recorded is set out in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Number of girls and women who were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry per decade, 1922–84

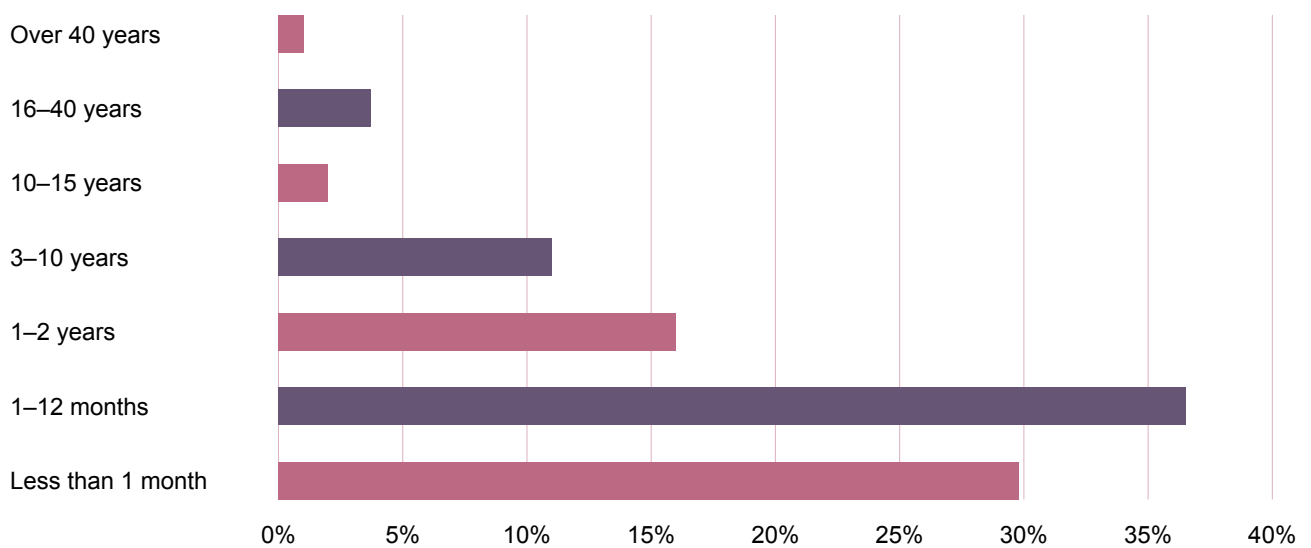


5.0 How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

There are some difficulties in assessing the length of stay in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry as for 159 girls and women (13.8% of all admissions) no leaving date was recorded. In addition, there were 201 (17.5% of total admissions) women who had multiple entrances and exits, making it complex to calculate a total length of stay in the institution. In some cases, such as that of a 16-year-old girl who arrived in the institution in 1936, the register simply recorded 'multiple entries and exits' and recorded no leaving date.

Other individuals have a more complex series of entries and exits recorded against their name. This was true of a 14-year-old girl who was admitted on 2 March 1934, ran away on 11 May and then returned on 1 July. She left again after a few weeks and returned in July 1935 before being 'dismissed' by the GSS in August before returning, once more, in December. The following year she left in July for several weeks before returning briefly and then leaving for six months until February 1937. She remained in the institution for several weeks and then left for a few days, came back again and then left for a month. She returned in April, stayed for a couple of months, and then seems to have gone to the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Belfast for five months, came back to Derry/Londonderry and was then 'dismissed' again on the 19 April 1938 but returned ten days later. She went to hospital and came back on 9 August but was then 'dismissed' for the third time in October 1938. She returned in November 1938 before leaving again in January 1939. Her date of return is not recorded, but it is noted that she went to hospital several times in 1953 and 'went out again in 1954'. It then simply says 'returned' with no date and no date of leaving. The length of stay for the 791 girls and women for whom this information was recorded is set out in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Length of time girls and women stayed in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry



	Less than 1 month	1-12 months	1-2 years	3-10 years	10-15 years	16-40 years	Over 40 years
No. of girls and women	236	289	127	85	17	29	8
%	29.8	36.5	16.1	10.7	2.1	3.7	1.0

Eight women remained over 40 years in the institution. This included a woman who was transferred from Armagh Prison when she was 20, in 1923, and died in 1977. Another woman was admitted in 1930 aged 37 and died after 50 years, in 1980.

In addition, the records for 201 women did not capture the length of time they remained in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. For another 159, the women had multiple entries and exits, and it is not possible to accurately chart the total amount of time they spent in the institution. Included in the numbers with unknown lengths of stay are 17 women who do not have a departure date recorded but who were still in St Mary's in the 1990s and presumably moved to the Beechway or Daleview residential homes when they opened. Of the eight women who transferred from the GSS St Mary's Institution in Newry when it closed in 1984, five were still alive when records for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry ceased in 1994. The notes for one of these women are the only mention of a transfer to 'Beechway Care Centre' in October 1994. The other mention of Beechway was for another woman who had transferred from the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Newry and who had gone to live in a flat with a friend but after a couple of years had 'requested to come back and live in Beechway...to be with the other ladies that went to live in Beechway from St Mary's'.

6.0 Women who never left St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

At least 40 women who had spent longer periods of time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, particularly those who entered before 1950, had 'E de M' recorded in their notes. This stood for *Enfant de Mary*, or *Child of Mary*, and indicated that they had taken a decision to formalise their stay. It was generally after two years of what the GSS assessed to be exemplary conduct and evidence of sincere conversion that 'penitents' were allowed to make a renewable annual vow, or 'consecration', to remain in the convent for the following year. This was also known as becoming an auxiliary or a trustee. One historian has explained that, in practice, 'very many stayed in for life. They were to be the really white sheep...the trustees.'²⁸ Eight of the women in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were recorded as celebrating their 'Jubilee' as a Child of Mary. Eight women before 1950 also became 'consecrated'. A woman admitted when she was 20 in 1929 was 'Rec'd by E de M' but was then 'taken out' by her mother in 1935, returned in 1943 and 'went to the Magdalens' and was consecrated in September 1945. A 17-year-old girl admitted in 1941 was recorded as 'E de M' and 'consecrated' in January 1950.

In the testimony of Sister 1, she used the term 'senior girl' as an additional term for those who had made this commitment to stay in the GSS St Mary's institution.

“

A senior girl was there for a long time and...you'd call herself an Auxiliary. That she had made a commitment to help the girls and to...to support the Sisters in their work...[the Auxiliaries] guided the girls. They were there to guide them really and to...not to...not to challenge them or anything but to guide them really.

In testimony recorded with PT, she outlined what she had discovered about her aunt who spent over 40 years in the institution. From what she said it is very possible that her aunt became a trustee.

“

'When I was working in the laundry', she'd say. She said she used to like run messages, going to collect prescriptions and things like that, for other members. So, she was...she must have been trusted to not run away.

Another indication of her aunt's role within the laundry surfaced at her funeral, which was held at the GSS Convent in the early 2000s. PT recalled that 'there was a good few people there who would remember her. Now a few people said to me 'we remember her delivering the laundry [from] hotels and schools probably, there would have been boarding schools, a few boarding schools in Derry then'.

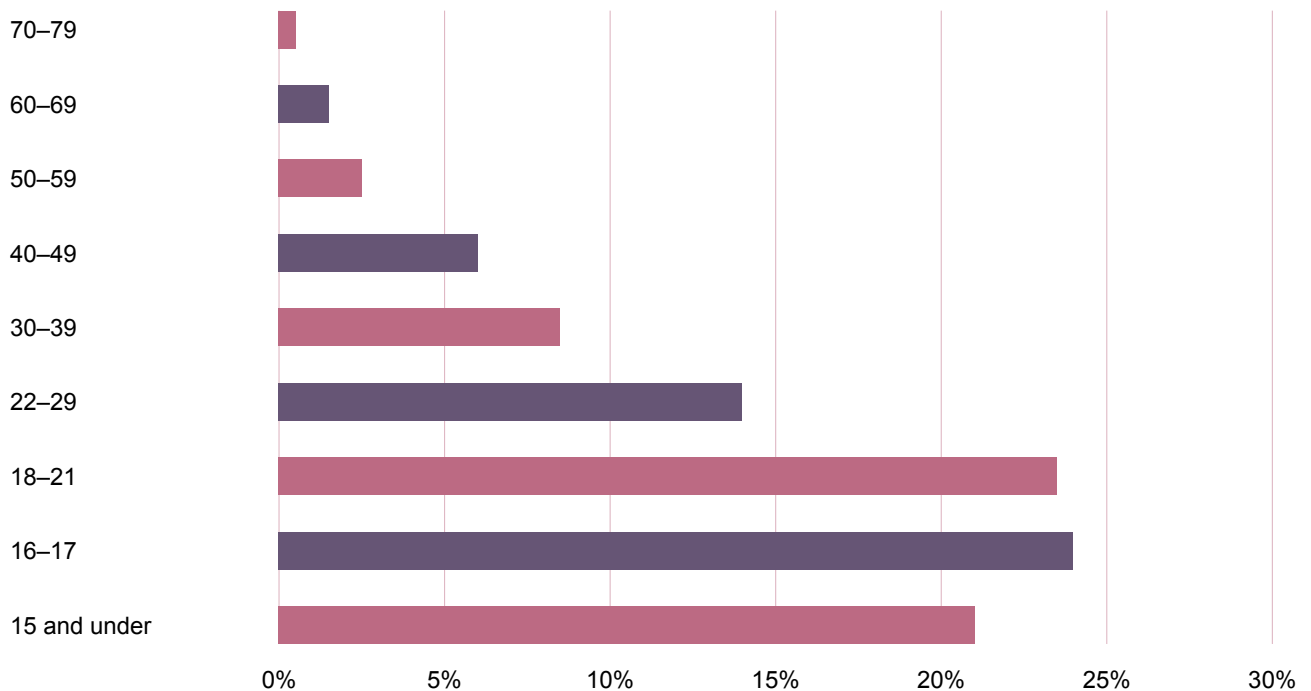
7.0 What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The ages of those who entered the institution ranged from 6 to 78. Of some significance in this context is the proportion of girls under the age of 18 as this was an issue

scrutinised by the HIAI, which made criticisms of the GSS in this area. The figures produced here indicate that the HIAI underestimated the importance of this matter by undercounting the number of young girls sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry.

There were 245 entries where age was not recorded, but out of the 906 where age was recorded it is evident that teenagers made up the largest proportion of those admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. The ages of the 906 girls and women for whom a date of birth was recorded is set out in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3: Age of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry



	15 and under	16-17	18-21	22-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
No. of girls and women	188	217	212	126	70	52	23	13	5
%	20.8	24.0	23.4	13.9	7.7	5.7	2.5	1.4	0.6

The oldest woman to enter St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry was a 78-year-old who converted from Protestantism to Catholicism. She died in the institution aged 92 in 1952.

A number of very young children appear in the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry register, but it is assumed that they did not work in the laundry and that they were placed in the Sacred Heart Home until they reached school-leaving age, which was 14 up until 1957 at which point it was raised to 15. The Sacred Heart Home in Derry/Londonderry operated between 1936 and 1952. There were three six-year-olds who appear in the St Mary's

register. One entered in 1939, and it is recorded that she left in 1950 to work in a hotel but ran away and came back to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry on several occasions. It is assumed that once she was 14, she would have been assigned to work in the laundry. Another six-year-old who was admitted in 1944 only stayed two weeks before going to the Sacred Heart Home in Belfast to continue her schooling. The third six-year-old entered with her sister in 1938, and when she was 16 they went to the USA to join their father. She later became a nun, joining a religious order in the USA.

Two nine-year-olds, three ten-year-olds and four 11-year-olds were admitted before 1950. An 11-year-old was admitted in 1943 when her family were evicted from their house and her mother admitted to a mental hospital. She remained in the St Mary's institution until she was 16 and then went to work in a knitting factory. Three 12-year-olds (from a town whose name has been redacted) were admitted by court order in the 1960s (exact year redacted), with one being 'sent to England' three years later, another being 'released by the court' four years later and the third leaving the institution five years later. Given that a Sacred Heart Home existed on the same site as St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry between 1936 and 1952, some of these very young girls may have been recorded in the St Mary's register but were living in the Sacred Heart Home and attending school rather than working in the laundry.

Two girls aged 12 and 13 were sent by the court in (year redacted) to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry and remained for six months after five men had been prosecuted for their 'indecent assault'. The men were 'a great deal older than the girls and had given them money'. The form completed by the welfare authority recorded the girls' 'anticipated length of stay' as 'indefinite'. However, the records indicate they left the institution after six months and that they were 'released by the court' to their parents.

A 13-year-old who was admitted in 1937 had a very unusual history. She was recorded as going to France to join a religious order in 1939, and remained in France during World War Two, becoming an interpreter for the US government after D-Day. She married an American soldier in 1946 and went to the USA with him.

8.0 Teenage girls admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The presence of girls who were 14 and under meant that St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry was required to register as a voluntary children's home under the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1950.²⁹ When Miss 1, a Ministry of Home Affairs inspector, visited in April 1953 she said there were 'only a few teenage girls, the rest older women'.³⁰ However, it would appear that there were at least 15 girls under 18 years old in the institution in April 1953. Similarly, when Miss 2 of the Ministry of Home Affairs visited in September 1973, she found only two girls under 18; however, there had been at least 15 admitted across the year.³¹

In a 'Social Analysis' written by the GSS discussing their work over the period 1919–1987, they explained that from 1952 onwards 'the needs of the adolescent girls coming into our Residential home had become a major concern'. They described how 'these

young girls were referred to us by local orphanages some of whom were 'War Babies' very disturbed and difficult while a big number were brought here by their parents, priests or sometimes the police'. Others were referred to as 'products of foster homes where relations had broken down'. These teenagers were, according to the GSS, 'trained in hand-crafts, needlework, cookery, drama, singing, and religious instruction'.³² They further explained that, prior to the 1960s and 1970s, 'most of the girls were voluntary cases' but this changed and 'now we got them through the Social Services – mostly court cases and girls taken off the streets at night time'. GSS stated that as they were all teenagers they 'had to be treated differently to those in our care for a number of years', so 'a special teenage unit was opened' and they were 'separated from the older ladies and a separate re-education programme was devised for them' with some attending local schools or being employed locally.³³

Part of the institution was renovated and Bellevue Hostel opened in 1975 which was described as being for 'teenagers in moral danger' and also for 'working girls, nurses, bank clerks and students'.³⁴ An inspection report for Bellevue Hostel in 1981 by the Social Work Advisory Group, DHSS, raised some concerns about the Hostel. The inspector explained that the St Mary's buildings 'present a rather gaunt and forbidding picture to a passer-by. Internally the buildings are a "rabbit warren" of passages and staircases in which it would be very easy to get completely lost.' He went on to comment that while the rooms were 'well furnished' and he liked the 'bright colour scheme', he 'felt that the whole set up is not right, because of the way in which St Mary's overshadows the whole of the accommodation for the teenagers'. He had 'considerable doubts about the future of the hostel' which he felt were shared by the Sister in Charge. These doubts appeared evident when he asked the Sisters what they felt the aims of the Hostel were and the Sister in Charge said that at present the 'principal aim is to "fill up space"'. This was disputed by the other Sisters who said that their basic aim was to 'rehabilitate young people into society and to give accommodation to young people unable to cope alone or within their own families'. The inspector felt that while this may be the aim 'the organisation was failing to achieve this objective'. He acknowledged the 'high level of motivation and "good-will" among the Sisters' but he doubted that they had 'either sufficient number of staff or the specialised training and expertise needed to provide a treatment based residential social work service for the disturbed young people that they aim to help'.

The inspection report concluded that in hindsight the decision to spend public money on the creation of the hostel 'may prove to have been wrong' and that it was doubtful if 'such a large institution is the right place to house adolescents'. It recognised that the GSS were 'highly motivated to provide a beneficial social service as part of their religious life' but that they too 'recognised the shortcoming of their present role'.³⁵

The HIAI considered the numbers of girls under 18 in the St Mary's institution in Derry/Londonderry. However, it evidently did not have access to the age data discussed here as it concluded that 'over the three decades [assumed to be the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s] covered by the evidence of the applicants to the HIAI it would seem that those under 18 made up less than ten percent of the females 'resident' in the Good Shepherd in Londonderry'. However, calculations from the registers suggest that 24.1% of those admitted in those three decades were under 18. It is also evident that the returns for

under-18-year-old girls that were used by the HIAI to come to their conclusions were not accurate. For example, the HIAI reported that Ministry of Home Affairs files suggest that six girls were in the institution in 1964 and that none were of school age, but the GSS admissions registers indicate at least eight girls there in 1964 who were under the age of 15.³⁶ It is possible that girls sent to the institution by so-called ‘voluntary’ arrangements made between the GSS and a girl’s parish priest or her parents explain the differential.

The HIAI also examined whether girls had been required to work in the laundry at Derry/Londonderry. It concluded that placing them in the St Mary’s institution, alongside adult women, was inappropriate and that there was evidence of girls carrying out unpaid labour in the laundry. The HIAI deemed it to be a systemic failing by the GSS that children under school-leaving age were accepted into an ‘institution that was not completely child-centred’.³⁷

In response to the scrutiny received on this issue from the HIAI, the GSS offered a defence, maintaining that they had always provided refuge ‘for those abandoned by society, bereaved or abused by others’. The Sisters were instructed that such girls and women should not be refused because ‘the person may have nowhere else to go’. They argued that this was the context in which teenage girls were admitted into the GSS St Mary’s institutions which were ‘mainly for adult women’. The GSS indicated that the state was aware of this and that it was a factor in some of the admissions to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry. They cited the case of a social worker who had arrived with a teenager with Down’s syndrome. The GSS’ closing submission to the HIAI stated that the social worker was told that the Sisters could ‘not cater for a teenager with special needs’. However, the social worker insisted that ‘she would be leaving the teenager with the Sisters’. Thereafter, the GSS statement maintained, the young woman was ‘mothered by the Sisters and the other residents’.

The GSS argued that their practice of accepting ‘crisis admissions’ appeared to ‘earn the Sisters a reputation which encouraged the civil authorities to place women and teenage girls with them’. They went on to argue that some of the placements of the youngest teenagers that resulted in their being placed alongside adult women occurred during ‘transitional periods’ when the GSS were taking steps to put ‘more progressive child-focused structures in place’. In the context of the GSS Convent in Derry/Londonderry, it is assumed that this means the years between the closure of the Sacred Heart Home in 1952 and the opening of the Bellevue Hostel in 1975. In a further point, the GSS clarified what they feel is their responsibility.



A number of those placements of young teenagers during those said transitional periods were made by the State and civil authorities, so it may have been that among those civil authorities there was a recognition that the Congregation would take on the most challenging cases, including those that had been sexually abused. It may have been that other children’s homes would not have been willing to accept such teenagers.³⁸

9.0 Where did girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry come from

As shown in **Table 3**, over one in three girls and women sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were from RoI. Unsurprisingly, given its proximity to this GSS convent, Co Donegal featured very heavily in this subgroup: 317 (30.4%) of the 1,043 girls and women sent to this St Mary's institution who had an address recorded came from that county. This statistic indicates that the border was no impediment to the placement of girls and women from RoI in this institution in another jurisdiction. It is also assumed that their placements would not have been financed by any statutory authority in NI, unless the individual concerned normally lived in the jurisdiction.

Also unsurprising is the fact that the city of Derry/Londonderry was the next most significant location from which girls and women had been sent. The proximity of Co Tyrone and Co Derry/Londonderry similarly explains the higher number of admissions from those counties compared with those that were closer to the other St Mary's institutions in Belfast and Newry.

Table 3: Address of girls and women before they were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Location	No.	Percentage
Republic of Ireland	362	34.7
Derry/Londonderry city	304	29.1
Co Tyrone	139	13.3
Co Derry/Londonderry	67	6.4
Belfast	56	5.4
England/Scotland/Wales	32	3.1
Co Armagh	27	2.6
Co Down	26	2.5
Co Fermanagh	17	1.6
Co Antrim	13	1.2

10.0 What was the religious background of the girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The majority of those admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were Catholic. Only 11 girls and women were recorded as Protestants. One other was a Mormon. A 30-year-old admitted in 1922 with a discharge date of 1933 had notes which stated: 'Protestant, her head affected. In and out.' In 1938, a Protestant 17-year-old brought by her mother was 'Taken by her father and a minister' after a month in St Mary's. Another 17-year-old admitted in 1932 also stayed a month and was recorded as 'went to hospital. Returned and ran away.' One woman who was referred to St Mary's by the Legion of Mary in 1941 and stayed for seven months only had 'A Protestant. Sent out' recorded on her notes. In the 1960s and 1970s it is evident that St Mary's was used for short-term accommodation, with two Protestant teenagers admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) being brought by the police and staying for one night. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), a Protestant woman stayed one night as she was 'not getting on with her husband'. For the other Protestant girls and women, it is unclear from the records why they entered St Mary's.

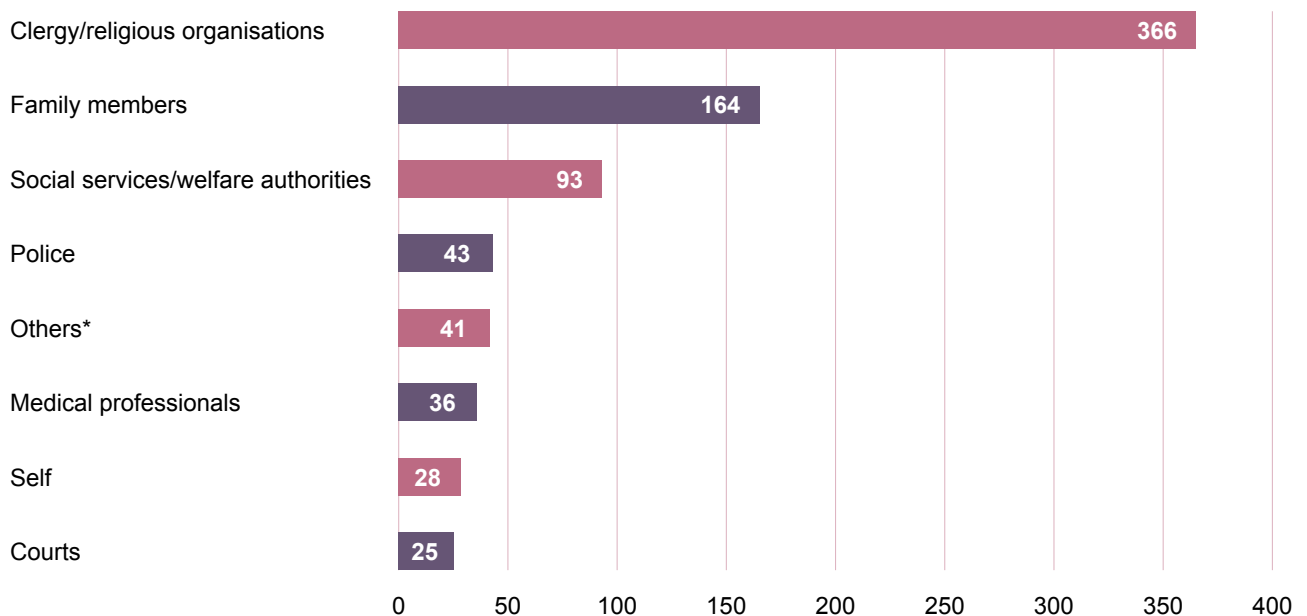
Nine others who entered were converts to Catholicism, including a 17-year-old who was admitted in the 1970s (exact year redacted). She had a Catholic boyfriend, and her father strongly objected to their relationship. She left St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry every weekend to see her boyfriend and after a year in the institution was 'received into the church and received holy communion'. There is no date of departure for this girl. This case indicates the extent to which involvement in cross-community courtships became increasingly dangerous as the Troubles developed and Catholic and Protestant communities became more estranged from one another. Another interdenominational relationship, also in the 1970s (exact year redacted), led to the arrival of a Catholic 14-year-old girl with a Protestant boyfriend and whose brief notes included the statement 'father does not approve'.

Seven girls and women were recorded as being from 'mixed marriages', including a 19-year-old admitted in the 1970s (exact year redacted) who was described as 'child of a mixed marriage' and 'went to Dublin, thumbed lifts' and stayed for one night.

11.0 Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

In 796 cases, the records provide information on the individual or organisation that organised the entry of girls and women to the institution. The GSS records use the term 'referrals' in this respect. The sources of these referrals are set out in **Figure 4**.

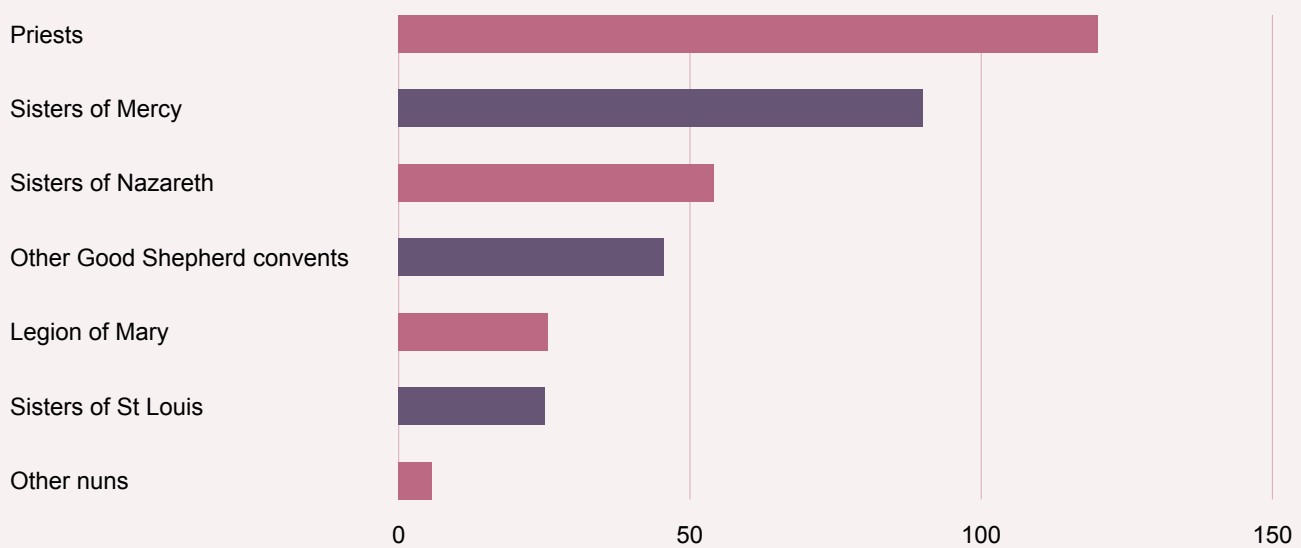
Figure 4: Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry



*Others: employers, friends, named individuals.

The largest number of referrals (46.0%) came from members of the clergy or other religious organisations. There were 366 recorded in the admissions register. A more detailed breakdown of these referral sources is presented in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: Referrals from clergy/religious organisations



	Other nuns	Sisters of St Louis	Legion of Mary	Other Good Shepherd convents	Sisters of Nazareth	Sisters of Mercy	Priests
No. of girls and women	6	25	26	47	53	89	120
%	1.6	6.8	7.1	12.8	14.5	24.3	32.8

Of the 120 women who were ‘referred’ by priests, the majority were from Derry/Londonderry, Donegal or the surrounding counties.

The religious order that ‘referred’ the largest number of girls and women was the Sisters of Mercy, who operated the Stranorlar County Home, Co Donegal. It was investigated as part of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes in RoI, as it admitted single pregnant women up to 1964. The Commission recorded that this institution transferred 19 women to Good Shepherd convents. However, the St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry admission register identifies at least 38 women who arrived from Stranorlar County Home.³⁹ One woman who was 37 when she was sent from Stranorlar, in the 1950s (exact year redacted), had ‘unmarried mother, low IQ’ recorded as her reason for admission. The notes recorded about her by the GSS contain information about her medical appointments and correspondence about her will from 1991. She was still in the institution at that point, 38 years after her arrival.

PT, who gave testimony as part of the QUB and UU report in 2021, explained that her aunt was transferred from Stranorlar to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry. However, like a lot of relatives, PT had experienced difficulties in finding out all the facts about how her aunt came to be in this institution for such a long period of time (over 40 years as PT understood it).



This is my mother's sister we're talking about. But I didn't know her. She was, like a lot of...of girls then, kind of thrown to the wolves because she got pregnant. Well, as far as we know, just piecing things together, in a home in Stranorlar in County Donegal where she had a baby...Suffice to say, she was banished from the family...family members have...obviously have rejected her.

PT only realised that she had an aunt who had worked in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry after her mother died and she was going through her paperwork.

The Sisters of Mercy also operated an orphanage and St Catherine's Industrial School in Strabane, in NI, from which girls and women were transferred to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. Among their number were two 16-year-olds who were referred in 1926 by the 'Mercy Nuns, Strabane'. They both remained for several months before it was recorded that they were 'dismissed'. The explanation for their expulsion by the GSS from the institution was not recorded.

Fifty-three girls and women were 'referred' by the Sisters of Nazareth, mostly from Nazareth House in Derry/Londonderry. The majority were teenagers between 14 and 18 years old, and over half of the admissions from Nazareth House involved multiple entries and exits or dismissal. The notes for a 16-year-old girl who was first admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) simply recorded 'back and forth between Laundry and Nazareth House. Sent back.' A 15-year-old girl admitted in the 1940s (exact year redacted) stayed in St Mary's for seven months and her notes recorded 'brought up in Nazareth house. Taken back there.' The testimonies collected for the QUB and UU report in 2021 included one that was written by XY, who was sent by the Sisters of Nazareth to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry when she was 16. This was in the 1950s. Her experience reveals the extent to which networks of Catholic institutions took responsibility for the lives of individuals such as XY. She had been placed with the Sisters of Nazareth aged three and remained there until she was 12, at which point she was sent to live in 'a home for the elderly' in Rol where she 'got a job in the sewing room'. However, she was unhappy there and returned to the Sisters of Nazareth until, aged 16, she was 'told to go across town to the Good Shepherd Convent'. XY worked in the St Mary's laundry and remained in the convent until the late 1980s.

The Sisters of St Louis in Monaghan, Kilkeel and Middletown 'referred' 25 girls and women to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. In Middletown they operated a reformatory which in 1950 became Middletown Training School for Catholic girls, to which seven girls were sent by the GSS in Derry/Londonderry. Twenty-six women were 'referred' by the Legion of Mary. A further 47 girls and women were transferred from other Good Shepherd institutions, including the Sacred Heart Home in Belfast and the other St Mary's institutions in Belfast and Newry. Seven women transferred from Newry when it closed in 1984.

Family members were recorded as arranging the placement of 164 (20.6%) girls and women. On these occasions, their mothers were recorded as being responsible for the 'referral' 54 times, a sister was the recorded person involved in 28 admissions

and a father in 24 admissions. The remaining cases involved other family members, such as brothers, aunts or grandparents. Forty-one girls and women were 'referred' by other named individuals, which included friends and employers. The reasons behind admissions or the legality of how women were 'referred' to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry is often unclear. However, the brief notes on some admissions do suggest that girls and women who may have had behavioural issues within family settings were brought to St Mary's. These included mental health issues, with a 40-year-old woman admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) by 'relatives/family' described as a 'psychiatric case' and a 25-year-old admitted in 1942 by her stepmother described as 'weak-minded'. On four occasions women described as 'inebriate' were admitted by family members. In 1930 a woman was admitted by her brother, and in 1929 a 55-year-old woman was referred by her son. In 1924 a 30-year-old woman and in 1925 a 50-year-old woman were both referred by their sisters. In a period before free health care, St Mary's may have been used by families as a form of rehabilitation for women with alcohol addictions.

The placement of girls and women by family members was discussed in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries. Mary Stuart identified concerns that in the early and mid-twentieth century, family doctors who were asked to certify a girl or young woman as having some form of 'mental deficiency' or 'mental illness [...] simply repeated the anecdotal evidence of the family'. Stuart is among many researchers who have raised concerns that girls and women could be institutionalised because 'they did not behave in what was considered an appropriate manner'.⁴⁰

Statutory agencies including social services or welfare authorities 'referred' 93 girls and women, and medical professionals were involved in the placement of 36 girls and women. Twenty-five others were sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by the courts and 43 were brought by the police. The HIAI when it reviewed files from the Department of Health and Social Services Child Care Branch noted that '[s]tranded young girls who came to the door or who are brought by the police are also accommodated'.⁴¹

A further 28 women were recorded as having approached the institution of their own volition.

12.0 What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The records do not always note why a woman or girl was admitted to the institution. In at least 150 cases there is no information at all recorded about why girls and women were admitted. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some pathways which led to girls and women being admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry.

12.1 Girls and women who had been pregnant outside of marriage and were sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Twenty-one women had 'unmarried mother' recorded as the reason that they were sent to the institution. Often the brief notes were shortened using the letters 'UMM' for these individuals. In some instances, it was clear that the girl or woman had been transferred directly from a mother and baby institution or had recently given birth.

Examples include a 19-year-old who arrived in the 1960s (exact year redacted), having been in the GSS Marianvale Mother and Baby Institution, Newry while awaiting the birth of her child. A 25-year-old was admitted from Stranorlar County Home in the 1960s (exact year redacted), a further indication of the use of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by Catholic institutions in RoI. Another example of cross-border movements of women was in the 1960s (exact year redacted), when a 42-year-old woman arrived from the GSS mother and baby institution in Dunboyne, Co Meath: an adoption order for her recently born baby was included in her notes.

The notes relating to a 19-year-old woman who arrived in the 1970s (exact year redacted) provide a glimpse into the relationships between a young mother, individual GSS and a social worker. This young woman had previously been in St Mary's, Newry, where 'she had seemed to settle well' but had then run away to Limerick, formed a relationship with a man and 'as a result of this encounter became pregnant'. The next institution that she experienced was the GSS Marianville Mother and Baby Institution, Belfast where it was reported that 'she did not settle well at first but went back and became very happy there' and 'very friendly with Sister D and was loathe to leave even after the birth of her baby'. The report maintained that she 'decided to have the baby adopted as she had no home to bring it to nor financial means of supporting a child'. The social worker went on to say, 'I felt that adoption would be the best course' and that she felt the woman was 'not sufficiently emotionally stable to look after herself and could not provide a secure home for the child'. The social worker remarked that 'one can only guess the intensity of love she felt for the child'. However, she also added that 'she was a difficult girl to deal with and...sometimes says that the baby was taken against her will and that social workers don't care for her now that they have her baby'. This detail is more than is offered for most girls or women, but it is information in which the perspective of the young woman concerned is almost entirely absent and what we do learn is filtered through the perspective of her social worker.

12.2 Girls and women considered to be in 'moral danger' sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The notes related to 15 girls and women included the term 'moral danger' as an explanatory factor in their being sent to the institution. It is not clear in every case what was meant by 'moral danger' but it obviously had several interpretations. As explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, it was linked with concerns about female sexuality, in particular anxieties that any girl or woman might be sexually vulnerable or be exploited. It is evident that priests, parents, social workers, police and probation officers were among those who in the early and

mid-twentieth century believed it was appropriate to confine girls and women in a GSS St Mary's institution because they were believed to be facing 'moral danger' of some kind. For those holding this view, this form of institutionalisation placed girls and young women away from the temptation of moral lapses and out of the reach of predatory men. In other cases, it was also deemed to be an appropriate response to those who had already been victimised by those predatory men via rape and incest. Only in some cases do the files indicate that these men faced any form of incarceration due to their criminal actions.

In four instances, 'moral danger' appears to refer to incest. In the 1930s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl was placed in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by the Legion of Mary as she was in 'moral danger' because she was 'living with an undesirable uncle'. There were three other cases where incest was referenced. The reason given for the admittance of a teenage girl in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was that she was in an 'incestuous relationship with her father'. The term 'relationship' sanitised what was an incredible and deeply traumatising abuse of power and his daughter by her father. It is language that was commonly used in such circumstances and can be found in newspaper reports of child sexual abuse cases published during those years. This girl remained in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry for a few weeks before going to live with an older sister under a Fit Person Order.

A 16-year-old girl who was brought to the institution by her social worker (year redacted) had previously been placed in a children's institution following incest. Her father had been imprisoned for rape. She had been returned to her family home for several years before her social worker decided to place her in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry.

Teenagers were not the only victims of predatory men. A 39-year-old woman admitted in (year redacted) was described as 'in moral danger from the husband of her sister'. She remained for only a few weeks before being transferred to a hospital (location redacted), which offered her psychiatric treatment.

In some cases, the language used by professionals involved in assessing the victims-survivors of sexual abuse was lacking in empathy and exhibited a degree of victim blaming. The notes recorded about a teenager who arrived in the 1970s (exact year redacted) stated that she had made 'allegations that her father "interfered" with her'. Her notes record that her psychiatrist 'dismissed these allegations as fabrications' and the school health visitor described her as 'a spoilt immature child'. In what would today be read as a warning sign that warranted a more empathetic and active response, her notes went on to explain that she 'appears normal outside the home situation but shows total withdrawal inside it'.

Another example of a lack of empathy for a victim of sexual abuse involved the case of a 14-year-old girl who, in the 1960s (exact year redacted), was described as in 'moral danger' and living in 'unsuitable' home conditions. Her notes expand on this.

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...wants to talk a lot about herself...makes no secret of the fact that she ran away from her foster parents and even made an attempt on her life. Looks on herself as the one who has been victimised and cannot see her own faults, or the trouble she has caused others.

The context of her described behaviour becomes a lot clearer when reading further to discover that this young girl had disclosed that ‘she was molested and seduced several times by one of the boys [in her foster home]. He then told [a] second boy who used her’.

There is one sexual assault case identified in the records, involving two young girls who had been placed in St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry (date redacted) by the courts for six months after five men had been prosecuted for their ‘indecent assault’ (there was also a third girl). The HIAI discussed, in detail, the cases of these girls and also heard evidence from witness HIA107 who was sent to this St Mary’s institution and remained there until the age of 18. She had been the victim of a serious sexual assault. The HIAI queried why the Juvenile Court had not taken the ‘sensible course’ by sending these girls to children’s homes and concluded that ‘either the police or the court approached the GSS in Londonderry to take the children because they knew that the Sisters looked after teenagers and unmarried mothers’. This might have made the GSS seem ‘the appropriate place to send children who had been exposed to some form of sexual behaviour’. However, this decision was judged ‘wholly inappropriate’ by the HIAI.

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[There is] no doubt that the Good Shepherd Sisters should have refused to take the children on a permanent basis. By accepting them on a long-term basis, which turned out to be over four years in the case of HIA107, the Good Shepherd Sisters failed to ensure that proper care was provided for these children and that was a systemic failing on their part.⁴²

In two situations where the term ‘moral danger’ was used it related to concerns about moral behaviour and ‘bad houses’, which referred to brothels, or houses associated with sex work. A young woman sent to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry in the 1940s (exact year redacted) was described as ‘Low IQ, living in a bad house. Moral danger.’ A teenage girl admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was described as ‘beyond control of parents and in moral danger’. She had run away from home several times and on the last occasion ‘she was found in a house of ill-repute’.

Being out of parental control, ‘running around...can’t be got in at night’ and in ‘moral danger’ were the reasons given for a mother placing her teenage daughter in the institution in the 1970s (exact year redacted). The notes indicated that she acted on the advice of her GP. This is an example which indicates the extent to which some of the ‘referral’ statistics cited above might not reveal the range of actors involved in the decisions to send girls or women to a GSS St Mary’s institution where they would have worked in its laundry.

The role of another professional, this time in the continued confinement of a teenage girl, is revealed in the instance of an individual who was admitted in the 1970s (exact year redacted). She was described by an educational psychologist as having a low IQ, and the psychologist stated that given her 'previous difficulties, she would certainly be at moral risk in unsupervised circumstances'. He felt that while she wanted to go home, her interests were best served 'by staying at the Good Shepherd Convent' and that 'perhaps arrangements would be made for her to visit home more frequently'.

In evidence given to the HIAI by the GSS, there is reference to the role of an important benefactor to the convent in its earlier decades of operation and her interventions on the grounds of 'moral danger'. This was Mrs Frances Lacy Nicholson, the matriarch of a very affluent family from Ardmore just outside Derry/Londonderry city. The GSS described her involvement.

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...as well as organising fund raising activities, she brought many girls to our home, some of whom were being hired out for work in farms throughout the Derry County and also Donegal. She realised their moral danger and encouraged them to come to St Mary's class for protection.⁴³

Nicholson was responding to the hiring fairs that continued well into the twentieth century, in which farmers hired extra labour, including children. The system was open to exploitation, particularly as it often involved these young labourers being isolated on remote farms. There is one reference to hiring fairs in the St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry records with a 17-year-old girl, who was admitted in 1935 and stayed for three months, recorded as being 'taken out by father to get situation at Strabane hiring fayre'. A newspaper article published in 1957 reflected on the by then almost extinct Derry Hiring Fair, noting that the event, which took place in the Diamond, was 'a degrading performance, a survival of the slave markets of other lands and times'. The writer maintained that it was 'particularly degrading for the girls, lined like cattle and examined pretty much the same way by farmers wishing to engage them and bidding against each other for their services'.⁴⁴ The wages agreed on these occasions were often paid to their parents, who returned home while the young workers headed off with the farmer to begin several months of agricultural labour.⁴⁵

Nicholson was part of an influential and wealthy local Catholic family. By the 1940s, her son, C.A. Nicholson KC, was a barrister and legal adviser to the NI Ministry of Home Affairs.⁴⁶ The role of the family in relation to the GSS is one example of how the Order benefited from the support of NI's influential Catholic families. The intervention of Nicholson in the lives of the poor girls and women that she 'rescued' from the hiring fairs represented a classic form of paternalistic,⁴⁷ charitable engagement. She may well have felt satisfied when she redirected young girls from hiring fair contracts to the laundry, but this would have come at a financial cost to their families who lost a much-needed wage. The young girls themselves were institutionalised because of this intervention in their lives. It is impossible to assess what their views on this issue might have been.

12.3 Girls and women who were sent by the courts to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Girls and women were sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry from the courts or by court orders for a variety of reasons. The institution was seen as a place of correction, an alternative to prison, where women could be 'reformed'. As has just been outlined, it was also viewed as a location where girls and women considered to be at risk could be placed for their own 'safety'.

There are 17 cases in the records where women appear to have been convicted of a criminal offence and were detained in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by a court. The GSS admission records do not provide a great deal of information on this, so it is difficult to provide accurate quantifiable data. However, newspapers did cover some court cases that indicate how judges and magistrates made use of the GSS St Mary's institution in Derry/Londonderry as a place of detention.

In 1924, a 'young woman' was charged with vagrancy at Londonderry Petty Sessions. She had been before the court previously and had been 'allowed to go to St Mary's'. However, she subsequently 'broke away from there'. On this second court appearance, the woman said she would go back to the convent and the Mother Superior agreed to 'take charge of her and give her another chance'. The magistrates adjourned the case for a month 'on condition she went back to the Convent'.⁴⁸

In 1932, a woman from Claudy was charged with the theft of wellington boots by deception. She was already awaiting trial on similar charges. On the first occasion she was released on bail but had not returned to her home address as she was obliged to do because, she explained to the magistrate, she feared a 'beating by her mother'. She agreed to go to the Good Shepherd Convent and was 'remanded on personal bail'.⁴⁹ In 1950, a woman was confined to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry for 12 months by the court as a condition of her probation. She had been arrested for cashing money orders, stolen from her family.⁵⁰

This institution was also used as an alternative for more serious crimes. In 1926, a 'girl of the servant class' was charged with infanticide⁵¹ at the Co Tyrone Assizes in Omagh. The judge recorded a sentence of nine months with hard labour but 'put her under a rule of bail' to go to the 'Home of the Good Shepherd, Derry, and remain there for two years'. He went on to say that if she were to 'behave herself while in that institution, obeying the orders of those in charge...she would hear nothing more about the sentence'.⁵² The St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry admissions register recorded that she stayed beyond her sentence and was 'consecrated' in 1931, therefore becoming a 'trustee'. There is no departure date recorded against her name.

It appears that courts in RoI also utilised St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry as an alternative to imprisonment. Evidently, the border was not viewed as a barrier to this practice. In one example, a 17-year-old girl, who was convicted for the theft of several purses, appeared at Killybegs Court in Co Donegal in 1934. The judge told her that 'he would send her to jail unless she went to the Good Shepherd Home' and that 'he was offering her a chance

of going to a Catholic Home, where her bodily and spiritual needs would be looked after, and where she would get a good training and be brought up a good Christian'.⁵³ There would have been no legal authority for a placement in NI from a court in RoI and it is possible that this proposal was made in consultation with the young woman's parents and, possibly, the GSS. As we saw earlier, Co Donegal was the source of many entrants to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, so the institution was well known within this county. However, the young woman rejected the court's proposal. At her next court appearance, she refused to go to the GSS institution and made it clear she would 'rather go to jail' as she would not 'receive instruction and be under discipline'. She was sentenced to six months imprisonment with hard labour.⁵⁴

In another instance, the court encountered a more conformist response. A Donegal woman who was charged with stealing a watch valued at £15, two dresses, a pair of shoes and an engagement ring in 1948 had her case adjourned twice to enable her to 'enter the Good Shepherd home'. The court later received confirmation that she was 'doing very well in the Home' and bound her over for 12 months.⁵⁵

Probation orders were also used to detain women in the institution. In one example, a 21-year-old woman was sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry on a probation order in the 1960s (exact year redacted). She had previously been in the institution for three years. Her probation officer wrote to her saying, 'I had a long talk with your mummy...and she is going to write to you and answer any letter. She says that she hopes that you are making some progress and that you are doing your best to fit yourself to eventually live in the outside world'.

In at least 27 instances, the courts sent girls and women to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry under protection orders, such as Fit Person Orders, which were for girls who were in moral or physical danger or were the victims of neglect. Under Section 99 of the Children and Young Person's Act (Northern Ireland) 1950, statutory agencies could remove a child and place them with a person fit to take care of and protect them.

In another case, a teenage victim-survivor of rape was effectively punished for the rapist's actions when she was then confined to this institution. This was a 17-year-old girl who was placed in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1950s (exact year redacted) under a Fit Person Order as she was 'a young person against whom an offence under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885, to wit unlawful carnal knowledge has been committed'. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 15-year-old girl was admitted under a Fit Person Order for serial truancy from school. In the same year, another 15-year-old was 'committed until she was 18 by the court' as she was 'beyond the control of parents and in moral danger'. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl was removed from her home under a Fit Person Order. Her relationship with her mother had broken down and she had allegedly begun stealing. The GSS report described her state.



[She] appears to look on her future as now being rather fatal. She feels she will remain in the convent until she is 18 and regards it as a punishment for stealing. Her parents have been to see her, but they continue to scold and criticise. Sister [name redacted] would rather their visits were curtailed.

In 93 cases social services were recorded as the main actor in a 'referral'. With the establishment of the welfare state in NI in 1948, statutory agencies used the GSS St Mary's institutions to place girls and women. Sometimes this was through court orders and on other occasions as a care placement when relationships had broken down at home or in a foster home. One 15-year-old girl was placed by her local welfare committee in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1960s (exact year redacted). According to her notes, she was placed there because 'her mother made her steal' and her home conditions were very poor. Her father was described as 'temperamental and quarrels a lot in the house', her mother as having a 'low IQ'. Her mother was also judged to be a 'poor housekeeper' whose 'home is dirty'. This teenage girl returned to the family home after three years but then ran away and came back to the GSS Convent where it was reported that 'she said she wanted to stay here as she was not happy at home due to all the fighting there'. This example bears comparison with sentiments expressed in testimony from Bernadette Ross and 20240526TB, who both recalled the Belfast GSS Convent (in particular its Sacred Heart Home) as a place of sanctuary from the domestic violence in their family homes.

The records present evidence of only one instance where the legal authority under which a woman or girl could be detained within St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry became a matter for some reflection. This involved a 15-year-old girl who went missing from her family home in the 1970s (exact year redacted). When she was found, she was brought to St Mary's, where she stayed for four months before leaving. Several months later, the GSS were asked by the welfare authorities to take her back and she was driven back to the convent in a police vehicle. On arrival, 'she tried to escape from them but was caught' and then according to the GSS notes 'created a big scene screaming and crying' before 'eventually the police left and she calmed down'. However, two days later she 'escaped through a downstairs window' only for the police to return her yet again 'within the hour', this time accompanied by a 'military escort'. She was described as having 'shouted and screamed that she wanted her mammy', and the GSS recorded that her resistance paid off as eventually the 'police took her home as we had no legal right to keep her and no guarantee she would not run again'.

12.4 Girls and women recorded as 'special care' or as having learning disabilities who were admitted to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

At least 120 girls and women who spent time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were recorded in the GSS admissions register as being registered with the 'Special Care Committee' or having a learning disability. However, the language used to describe these individuals was representative of the limited understanding of the period. Often the term 'low IQ' was utilised in combination with other descriptions such as 'socially inadequate': a term which was used in the records until the 1960s. This is a language of deficiency

which is all the starker because it was usually compiled with brevity and without any nuance about personality or personal history.

A 29-year-old woman admitted in 1936 was described in her notes as an ‘unmarried mother, low IQ, socially inadequate’. She remained in the institution, working in its laundry for over 40 years.

In at least 19 cases there was use of the term ‘low IQ’ or ‘socially inadequate’. Often there is no date of departure recorded against their names. One woman was admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) when she was 20, and her notes recorded ‘Mentally handicapped – mongol’ (the obsolete term for Down’s syndrome) and also ‘very retarded’. The register recorded a date of death for this woman in the early 1970s. She had been referred by a welfare committee (county redacted) and her notes recorded that a payment of £5 per week in the 1970s was paid by the committee to the GSS.

In five cases between the 1930s and 1970s, references to learning disabilities or poor mental health were included in GSS comments. In the case of one woman, who arrived in 1938, the GSS remarked: ‘incapable of training (simple)’. A 14-year-old girl who was brought by her mother ‘to be trained for work’ came for a week on trial in the 1970s (exact year redacted) ‘due to the fact that she is slow at school’. Other terms used in comments in the admissions register included ‘mentally retarded’, ‘backward’, ‘no intelligence’ and ‘weak minded’.

Thirteen women were recorded as being registered as ‘special care’. This meant that they were considered to have a learning disability and were registered with the Special Care Committee (each health and social care trust had a Special Care Committee). For example, a 21-year-old woman admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) as a ‘special care’ case remained in St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry until at least 1991. A 40-year-old woman admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was described as ‘mentally retarded’ and was a ‘Special Care Case’ admitted under the Mental Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1948; there is no date of discharge recorded but it was noted that she ‘received her first communion in 1983’ and was confirmed in 1985.

12.5 Girls and women recorded as having physical disabilities or mental health issues who were admitted to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry

In around 30 instances women were recorded as having a physical disability or some form of illness. In five cases girls and women were recorded as being deaf and dumb; four arrived in the 1920s and one further woman entered the institution in 1951. They were all in their late teens or early twenties, suggesting that they may have finished specialised schooling and were then sent to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry because their local welfare committee identified no other form of support for them. Ten women were recorded as having some form of physical disability, which was described using terms like ‘deformed’ or ‘partly disabled’. Two women were described as epileptic and four women who arrived during the 1920s and 1930s were reported to have tuberculosis.

At least 48 women were recorded as having spent time in a mental health facility. A woman admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) when she was 21 was described as 'mentally retarded – 3 children. Is illegitimate and very temperamental.' However, it was not until the early 1990s that she was recorded as being admitted to Gransha Hospital, a psychiatric hospital. A 14-year-old girl who arrived in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was sent to Gransha for a few weeks after she took an overdose of tablets. Other women were attending psychiatric clinics as outpatients, such as a woman who arrived in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1940s (exact year redacted) and was described as 'suffering from nervous debility'. By the 1970s, she was attending a clinic at Gransha.

Twelve women were recorded as 'inebriates', the majority being admitted in the 1920s and having multiple entries and exits. The lack of admissions in the later part of the twentieth century reflects changing treatment and support available for those with alcohol issues. For example, the successor institution to the GSS Convent in Newry was the Cuan Mhuire Centre, operated by the Sisters of Mercy from 1984, which offered support for those affected by substance addiction.

12.6 Girls and women who were admitted for short-term or crisis accommodation to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Two hundred and thirty-six women were admitted for stays of under a month. In some cases, this was an overnight stay. Girls and women were sometimes brought by the police in these instances. This involved cases where girls or women who (presumably) had been detained by court orders in other institutions had run away and were then apprehended by the police, or cases where the police had become involved because of a suspicion that a woman or girl was involved in crime. For example, in the 1960s (exact year redacted) a 16-year-old girl who had run away from Middletown Reformatory was brought by the police, for one night, who then returned her to Middletown the next day. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), a 19-year-old who stayed in the institution for one night was brought by police who 'suspect[ed] drugs' had been used by this young woman. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), the police brought a 25-year-old woman who was drunk and 'supposed to have missed the train'. She left for Belfast the next morning. This appears to be an example of the GSS being used by the police as crisis accommodation for a woman who might otherwise have been left on the streets overnight. In similar circumstances, a 14-year-old girl stayed for one night in the institution because she 'was afraid to go home as she'd missed the bus'.

Some of those who received short-term accommodation at St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were young girls who had somehow made their way from England or Scotland to the city. Two 16-year-old girls from Scotland stayed for two nights in the 1960s (exact year redacted) before the welfare committee 'put [them] on the boat back home'. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 14-year-old girl from England (city redacted) stayed for a few hours before the police 'sent her home by boat'.

St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry was also used for short-term stays for women with marital problems. One woman stayed for a few days in the 1970s (exact year redacted) as she 'was not getting on with her husband'. Another woman stayed for a week in the 1960s (exact year redacted) after she 'left her husband and 4 children because he drinks'.

The chapters on the St Mary's institutions in Belfast and Newry explain that the Troubles created new crisis situations in which teenage girls might be sent to these institutions. The impact of the Troubles also resulted in several girls being sent to the institution in Derry/Londonderry for short-term accommodation. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), an 18-year-old was brought by police who had 'rescued' her from being tarred and feathered. This was a form of communal rough justice often used against women who were believed to be in relationships with members of the army or security forces. Teenage girls who attended 'soldiers' discos' were also assaulted in this brutal fashion.

In the 1970s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old Protestant girl was sent by a Catholic priest to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry as she had been threatened by Protestant paramilitaries because she had a Catholic boyfriend. This priest later arranged for her to be driven to the GSS Convent in Belfast 'to avoid being discovered' and she was then taken to England. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), a 14-year-old girl was brought to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry by a local priest following a row between the girl and her mother after an army officer had complained that she was 'frequenting an Army post'. She stayed for a month and was then transferred to a children's home.

13.0 What was daily life like in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

13.1 What the GSS records and testimony tell us about daily life in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The GSS perspective on daily life in this institution comes from several sources. Sister 1 and Sister 2 provided testimony for the QUB and UU report of 2021. The Order also sent a statement about its institutions in NI to assist with the writing of that report. Several GSS also offered statements to the HIAI and the Order furnished the inquiry with information. In addition, an interview with the Reverend Mother of the GSS convent recorded by an inspector with the Western Health and Social Services (WHSS) Board in 1970 detailed the daily routine in the laundry of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. All of these are drawn upon here. It should be noted that much of what the GSS submitted on these occasions was based on oral evidence. As the GSS explained in its final submission to the HIAI, they have no 'substantial contemporaneous evidence' to draw upon and as a result 'the Congregation worked to gather oral evidence from Sisters'. Through this process, they built up what they later described to the QUB and UU researchers as 'institutional memory'.

The routine of life in the institution was described in 1970. It was explained that some girls and women did embroidery, with others 'learning a song or being coached in some other way suitable to each case', and those who 'can move about' started work in the laundry at 8.45am. On a Monday to Wednesday working hours were 8.45am to 5.45pm, on a Thursday work ended at 4.30pm and on a Friday work in the laundry was for an hour and a half followed by 'cleaning out the wash-house until about 3.30pm'. The notes of the interview stated that while 'those who are capable work the above hours...there are many exceptions because of health, age, temperament etc'.⁵⁶

Among the GSS submissions to the HIAI are references to a 'residential block' being built for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in April 1936. Part of this building was allocated to the new Sacred Heart Home that accommodated children who were deemed to be from 'broken or unstable homes'. These children attended a local school during their time in the institution, according to the GSS submission.⁵⁷ The GSS' final submission stated that this school was St Breacan's Girls' Secondary School, although they acknowledged that this was not the case for three teenage girls in the 1960s. In their case, the GSS claimed that education had been provided within the convent. For teenagers beyond school-leaving age, the GSS maintained that there were opportunities to attend lessons with teachers who came to the convent to deliver classes and that two of the Sisters delivered classes on English, geography and typing.⁵⁸ This was from either the late 1960s or early 1970s.

The Order also informed the HIAI that it was a longstanding rule of the GSS that corporal punishments were prohibited.⁵⁹ However, one of the Sisters explained that other forms of punishment that were allowed included being 'black booked'. If a woman had not 'done her work properly' or cleaned her bedroom, her 'name would be written down in a black book and called out in public at a later time'. This Sister explained that 'if your name was in the black book, you were not allowed to watch TV'. She added that this practice ended during the 1970s. The same Sister also accepted that a further form of punishment was being made to eat a meal standing up. The Sister was asked about this because it had been raised in the witness statement of a woman who was sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1960s. The HIAI ruled that the policies of 'reading out misdemeanours in front of others and making the offender kneel, or making an offender stand to eat her meal, were a form of deliberate humiliation and amounted to emotional abuse'.⁶⁰

The GSS statements to the HIAI also addressed the issue of liberty. Magdalene laundries have faced scrutiny over the extent to which the girls and women confined to them were at liberty to leave the convent, whether that was permanently or simply to undertake simple activities in the outside world. In respect of the latter point, the GSS statement maintained that by the 1970s on Saturdays the girls and women could leave the premises.

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[The] ladies...were allowed to go down to the town to go to the shops and spend their weekly pocket money...but they had to be back in St Mary's by evening tea at 6pm.

On a related theme, one of the Sisters told the HIAI that during the 1970s, the girls and younger women in the institution were not allowed to leave to attend dances. She explained that the GSS 'were nervous about the ladies leaving the Convent late at night'. The nature of this point indicated a shift in the GSS stance from the early 1960s when leaving the institution was an exceptional event that would have involved any girl or young woman being accompanied by a trustee.⁶¹

The GSS statement to the QUB and UU researchers in 2018 did not include the details on daily life in the St Mary's institution in Derry/Londonderry that were offered for Newry. This included details of the working hours, which were reported as being from 9am to 6pm from Monday to Friday. Referring to Derry/Londonderry specifically, the statement

maintained that the ‘Sisters arranged bus trips for the ladies to Donegal, Bundoran and Rossnowlagh and other scenic areas’. These outings included ‘a special meal in a hotel’. Furthermore, each year ‘the Sisters rented a house in places such as Malin Head, Rathmullan, Culdaff and Rossnowlagh, Co Donegal so that the ladies could, in rota, get a week-long summer holiday’.

This statement also maintained that in the evenings there were ‘arts and crafts, singing and music’ and that the nuns recalled that ‘they often put on great plays which the Sisters recall with much fondness for the fun and laughter generated’. The statement added that ‘there was great camaraderie among the ladies and Sisters alike’. There was no mention of an evening meal, which must have been an oversight, but the statement records a suppertime ‘snack and drink of cocoa or Ovaltine before heading to bed’.

The QUB and UU researchers recorded testimony with Sister 1 in 2018, which included her reflections on her time working in the laundry in Derry/Londonderry just as the Troubles were beginning. She began by recalling that local Catholic men provided nighttime patrols to protect the convent from possible sectarian attacks. This was a frightening introduction to NI for Sister 1, who is from Rol. However, she has more positive memories of first entering the St Mary’s institution.

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I was introduced to the St Mary’s ladies, and I got a great welcome from them, they were really very loving really to me in a sense, so I found them...they were so delighted to see a young nun.

Sister 1 also shared a memory about the laundry’s recent modernisation. It had been ‘renovated and restructured and [was] quite a new laundry and very bright and it was open plan. There was Polymarkers, there was Tritons.’⁶² The Polymarker enabled the laundry workers to mark the appropriate washing settings on particular items. Sister 1 remembered ‘one of the girls was showing me how to do that’. She was involved in this work for a while, and Sister 1 recalled her remit.

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I was allocated to look after some of the hotels. The hotels came in in the morning, the washes from the hotels. And there was a big number of sheets and a big number of, what’ll I say, table linen, serviettes and towels. There were a few private washes too.

Sister 1 was also asked about what training was given in preparation for work in the laundry.

“

Well, it was the Sister in charge and the Sister in charge in the laundry who allocated them to different tasks and see how they got on. Maybe they were just folding for the beginning, just folding clothes. You know you fold the sheets. You see there was a big roller and you'd have to put, you know, put the sheet on this roller and you had to make sure it's kind of flat, and there was one girl at this end and one girl at that end and she'd put her hand just to make sure and then she'd kind of keep her hand on it to make sure it was running straight down the whole way and then it would come out of the other end. And then there were two girls or four girls, I'm not sure, and they'd take the sheet, and you'd double it in two and she'd keep her distance, and you'd double it again and then they'd come up and meet each other halfway or something, yeah, and then just fold it. But that's how that worked. But sheets could be hot when they come out.

Sister 1 acknowledged that there have been claims that silence was imposed in the laundry when work was in progress. However, she recalled that 'when I was there it was great craic...but I certainly remember them moving from here to there and coming up to me if I was up in the other room and having good chats themselves. It...it wasn't silence, you know?'

In the evenings, after work had finished, Sister 1 recalled training classes.

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...some of the girls were going out in the evening to classes in the minibus... the Sisters were taking them out to English I think and Cookery. Laundry finished around half-five and they had supper at six. And then the classes were at seven in the technical college I think and some of the Sisters went out with them really, but they went to some other classes I think themselves. But they were around the area for them, to take them home.

Sister 1 explained that she was not in the company of the girls and women in the evenings but recalls that they played games 'like Scrabble and Ludo and Snakes and Ladders' as well as table tennis. There was a record player and television set, and she remembered that the TV shows *Ironsides* and *Top of The Pops* were popular. There was also 'a great emphasis on music, and a great emphasis on plays and play clothes and doing little sketches'. Her understanding is that this was 'a means as well of teaching them elocution' as well as 'maturing them really and giving them a sense of confidence'. Sister 1 also remembered another nun whose only 'job' was to teach in a 'room dedicated to education', where typing was among the classes she offered as well as English and arithmetic. Sister 1 explained who the classes were for.

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[They were for] any girls who were...wanted to come and she'd go round and collect them, and it was an understanding with the sister in charge of the laundry that they could leave. So, they did classes up there until twelve-thirty when I think it was lunchtime then at twelve-thirty.

On Sundays there were poetry and drama classes with the same Sister, and another nun led religion classes.

Sister 1 remembered that the teenagers in the St Mary's institution had their own smaller group that socialised together. This would coincide with what Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross explained in their testimony about St Mary's, Newry, which had a junior group that included teenagers and women in their early twenties. Sister 1 commented on where the girls and young women had been sent from.

“

...some of them were there from Muckamore, they were there...they were registered 'special care', and some were put in by their parents, and some were under court order. So, there was a whole mixture of them really, so I would say... And there was some girls...they were former children's home girls who hadn't made it...made it to independent living in the community, and they were returned back to Good Shepherd, to keep them.

She added that some of these individuals left and returned several times: 'they were in and out themselves...they used to refer themselves'. Sister 1 acknowledged that some young women were unhappy that they were sent to work in the GSS laundry. One teenager had left a Sisters of Nazareth institution and got a job in a hotel. However, it was reported that she did not get on with the hotel manager.

“

[They] brought her to us [the GSS] and I know she was unhappy to be with us but what...the hotel weren't happy with her employment and she stayed with us then until she went up to Nazareth here in Belfast the following year to do children's nursing...I don't think she was that happy staying on, but what could you do? Because she had no [alternative] employment.

Sister 1's testimony confirmed that by the late 1960s the girls and women were permitted to leave the GSS Convent grounds on Saturdays: 'Oh I think they could go out on a Saturday, with a senior girl, you know? When they were accompanied. No girl went out really without there being somebody else with her.' Senior girl was another term for a trustee or auxiliary.

Sister 1 remembered that the women slept in dormitories that were sectioned off into groups of four beds with each bed having some sort of divide for privacy. She also recalled the outings and holidays that the women were taken on. She recalled that the GSS had a minibus and a couple of the nuns were drivers. The one-week annual holiday was taken in local destinations such as Culdaff and Moville. Day trips were taken to Buncrana and Rosstown and on these occasions 'they'd usually have a meal out in a hotel, or a restaurant. They'd know some restaurants. The Sisters looked after them that day, they paid for everything.' The St Mary's women did have some money, which they received each week. Sister 1 confirmed that it was 'not a whole lot I think...It was

more pocket money, I would say.’ As far as she knew the girls and women were given no access to a telephone. Visitors did come and these included families who befriended some of the girls and women in the institution. Some of the women took weekend trips to stay at the home of their befriender.

XY, who provided written testimony covering her many decades of living in this St Mary’s institution and working in its laundry, described the process of being befriended. She was introduced to a family, in the late 1960s, after she had been in the institution for well over a decade. XY explained that the members of this family ‘have become central to my life’. Originally, she was asked to babysit for them: the family lived close to the GSS Convent. She is now godmother to the child of one of the children she originally babysat and has been a guest at many family weddings. As XY has no family of her own, this has been very significant for her.

Asked about the policy of changing the names of the girls and women when they arrived in the institution, Sister 1 explained.

“

They were given new names, yes...some of them would say today they weren’t allowed to share their story, but that was up to them, but they were encouraged not to give too much information about themselves and that when they left nobody would know anything about them. They’d been with whichever or whatever period they were with us...But they seemed to take up their names fine. I never experienced any talk from the girls saying they didn’t like the name or didn’t wish to have it.

Sister 1’s view was that the St Mary’s institution brought some positive experiences for girls and young women who were facing personal difficulties.

“

But actually, a lot of the girls, you wouldn’t believe me, but they were in a time of crisis when they’d come in and they valued prayer really because I’d say to them, or somebody’d say ‘we’ll pray about that and God’ll...God’s always with you, God loves you, you see. Nobody loves you.’ We’d tell them that. ‘We’ll say a little prayer together now’ and they got attracted to it and it kind of helped them. And they felt like they got a lot of support through prayer.

13.2 What the testimony of women, their relatives and others tells us about daily life in St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry

It is possible to obtain the perspectives of women who were sent to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry in several forms. A small number gave witness evidence to the HIAI. In these cases, they all referred to their own experiences as girls in the institution. However, a good deal of what they told the HIAI is also relevant to the experiences of all women in the institution. The QUB and UU researchers and the Panel also heard testimony

from individuals with a connection to this institution. This was testimony from one woman who had laboured in the laundry for most of her working life, from the relatives of women who were admitted to this St Mary's institution at some point, and from others who had encountered the women who worked there. Finally, a publication by a housing association also included memories of several elderly women who had spent most of their lives in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry.

Five witnesses to the HIAI described their experiences in the institution. One of them was HIA211, who was sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, aged 17, in the early 1960s. She remained and worked in the laundry until the mid-1970s. In her testimony, she remembered that the nuns 'cut my hair and changed my name. They called me [redacted]...I was known as [redacted] all my time there.'⁶³

The admissions register for the institution also indicates the regular practice of changing the names of new arrivals. This included some of the very unusual 'class names' given to new arrivals. This must have disorientated the girls and women whose identities were changed in this way even if the GSS nuns understood the religious associations of the names that were given. They included Perpetua, Camillus, Dominic, Scholastica, Alphonsus, Borgia, Bernard, Pelagia, Celsus and Cyrille.⁶⁴ The 'class names' allocated to new arrivals had become more commonplace by the 1960s. For example, the final names recorded, in 1970, after which the practice appears to have ended, were Cissie and Gwyneth. The HIAI ruled on this practice.

“

[Changing women's names] caused considerable distress and confusion to those affected. We considered that the practice continued longer in Londonderry than it should have done and represented poor practice on the part of the Sisters.⁶⁵

PT – whose aunt spent over four decades in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry – was upset to learn that her aunt was given a different first name when she arrived with the GSS.

“

Now this is one thing that I was annoyed at. When I met her again, she was called [name given to her by GSS]...I asked her 'why're you called [new name] now?' and she says 'there were two other [aunt's original name]'...I mean they may as well've given her a number.

The chapter on St Mary's, Belfast includes testimony from WB, which indicates that social workers found it a challenging task when working with the elderly women who had formerly worked in the laundry there to discover their original names so that they could begin using them again. The women were confused by this process, which took place after they were moved to sheltered accommodation.

Witness HIA211 recalled that as a teenage girl she was unaware that she was in a laundry until an older 'resident' explained this to her. She described the work she carried

out as washing, drying and pressing laundry, and recalled being one of the youngest in the laundry and described the conditions as 'poor'.⁶⁶

Witness HIA107 worked as a seamstress, sewing vestments for priests, and observed that she 'never got any schooling... We just worked.'⁶⁷ The HIAI, however, accepted the GSS' arguments that she was taught within the convent by visiting teachers and the Sisters.⁶⁸ Other girls of school age appear to have gone to school but also worked in the laundry. Records of a 15-year-old girl admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) noted that while she was attending school she was also working in the 'Hotels Dept' in the laundry. This pattern of part-time laundry work for a school-age girl was also evident in testimony recorded with Bernadette Ross, which features in the chapter on St Mary's, Newry. The HIAI report concluded the following.



[It was] unacceptable for such young girls to be expected to do industrial work of this type even if the machinery had been recently modernised. This should not have been permitted by the Good Shepherd Sisters, and we considered this amounted to systemic abuse.⁶⁹

None of the HIAI witnesses received a wage for the work that they carried out, although HIA202 explained that she received pocket money. This was during the 1970s when the GSS started making small payments to those working in the laundries, a development made possible by what Sisters 1 and 2 explained was increased financial support from the state following the Seeborn Report in 1968.⁷⁰

Witnesses HIA211 and HIA107 were both very critical of their time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. HIA211 recalled that on arrival girls 'were thrown in the bath and a uniform put on us'. Her recollection was that there was never enough food and there was limited entertainment or leisure activities. She remembered that 'after lunch we just went out to the yard and we used to walk up and down. There was nothing else to do.' Similarly, HIA107 described St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry as 'worse than a prison' and explained that she was not allowed to see her family 'without a nun present'.⁷¹ She was also critical of the quality of food provided. However, in its final analysis the HIAI did not support claims that the food was of an unacceptable standard or quantity.⁷²

No details of disciplinary procedures or action taken against girls and women in the St Mary's institutions are recorded in the Good Shepherd records, except for cases where women were 'dismissed' or removed by the police. The testimony offered to the HIAI did feature some comments on disciplinary measures within the laundries. Some witnesses gave evidence of being 'slapped' by nuns for a particular infringement of the rules. Witness HIA202 recalled being slapped during her time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. She explained that this occurred after she had left the convent to visit a friend in the Creggan area of the city in the 1970s.⁷³ Witness HIA211 also recalled being slapped, in her case for not knowing the words to 'The Bells of St Mary's'.⁷⁴ HIA107 recalled a woman having her hair cut off as punishment for a transgression.⁷⁵

In offering its conclusions on the GSS and physical abuse of the teenage girls in the laundry, the HIAI ruled that there was ‘some justification’ to the GSS’ claim to be ‘enlightened’ in this regard. In 1897, the Order issued a directive forbidding its Sisters from striking a child.⁷⁶ At this point, the GSS referred to all those girls and women working within its laundries as ‘children’, making this directive a proscription of corporal punishment for all. In their closing statement to the HIAI, the GSS reiterated that there was no corporal punishment regime in place in any of their institutions in Ireland. Drawing on this statement, the Sisters urged the HIAI not to impose revisionist standards on institutions which operated many years ago.⁷⁷

However, the directive on punishment did not exclude other forms of routinised discipline. According to the statements of witnesses to the HIAI, punishment more commonly involved being made to scrub floors or to eat meals while standing up. HIA211, with reference to St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry, also recalled a method of punishment using a ‘black book’.

“

...on Sunday, we went into a big room and sat down on chairs. Sister 312 read out the names of the girls noted in the black book and what they had done wrong. We had to stand when our name was read out and then kneel down and say sorry.⁷⁸

The GSS accepted that this was the practice from the 1950s until the mid-1970s. The HIAI ruled on this as follows.

“

[Policies of] reading out misdemeanours in front of others and making the offender kneel, or making an offender stand to eat her meal, were a form of deliberate humiliation and amounted to emotional abuse.⁷⁹

More favourable observations by the HIAI about the GSS were reached on the improvements in conditions from the late 1960s, including the introduction of annual holidays for the girls and women who worked in the laundry for the rest of the year.⁸⁰

The HIAI investigated only cases of girls under 18 who were sent to the GSS St Mary’s institutions and worked in their laundries. They did not hear from any of the individuals who effectively spent a lifetime working in the St Mary’s laundry in Derry/Londonderry. XY was one such woman and she wrote a short testimony which she submitted for the QUB and UU report. Four other women who spent many decades in the institution were interviewed, in the mid-2010s, for a feature written by the housing association that managed their sheltered accommodation. All five of these women present positive assessments of life within the GSS, although none is without clear elements of regret about aspects of their life.

The four women who featured in their housing association’s article had all worked in the St Mary’s laundry in Derry/Londonderry for several decades.⁸¹ The article marked two decades since their arrival within the housing association accommodation. The

introduction of the women in the article indicated some of the issues that they faced in readjusting to life outside the institution. It also suggested that some of the measures that the GSS claimed to have taken to prepare women for independent living had not worked, at least in the case of these individuals.

“

[The sheltered housing] offered a new home and the opportunity for a vulnerable group of people who had developed a close family bond to stay together and extend their current support networks beyond the church. It offered residents a new caring and supportive environment where choice and control was encouraged and the opportunity to interact socially for the first time in their adult life. Since coming to live in [name redacted] residents spend time in enjoyable ways and do things for themselves within their home and the wider community. They have traced siblings and family members they were unaware of; go on holiday; take lessons in ballroom dancing; attend IT classes; enjoy trips to the cinema and theatre; go on bus runs and attend creative art classes.

The article went on to explain that ‘decision making, participation, choice and control are embedded in day-to-day activities and lifestyle choices made by’ the four women. This statement indicates the damage done to self-confidence by their previous institutionalised existence.

The first of the women who was quoted provided positive reflection about her work in the laundry but also allowed readers a glimpse into the fact that it could be a dangerous workplace. Her remarks on what meeting up with her family means illustrate the impact of the loss of access to a family life that she experienced during her time in St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry.

“

We came here on the 4th of October 1994. At the time it was sad to leave the Good Shepherd but I have made so many new memories here. Having fun one day I decided to play a trick on the girls in the Good Shepherd laundry. I crawled behind the six-roller calendar and grabbed one by the leg. The next minute I heard a shriek and as I looked up, I saw I had caught one of the nuns by the leg instead! I was so embarrassed! I also remember that one of the dryers went on fire and singed everything! We had good craic; sure, we were only young. My family means the world to me, and it is great when we all meet up.

In the case of the second woman quoted in the article, the sense of family separation was even more poignant as a daughter followed her mother into a lifetime in a GSS laundry.

“

I came to the Good Shepherd from Newry when I was around 12. I made my confirmation in Newry. My mother worked in the Good Shepherd, Derry in the laundry. I was in Newry, and she was in Derry. She was a hard worker and would have worked with the heavy blankets. She died before I came to the Good Shepherd. I always keep a photo of her.

The third woman quoted in the housing association article also recalled the laundry work fondly and was sad that it had closed.

“

I came to the Good Shepherd when I was 15–16 years old from the Nazareth House. I worked the old gas irons in the laundry in the Good Shepherd. Weddings I washed the wedding dresses and pressed the wedding veils. You put your foot on the press and the veil twirled around. In those days wedding dresses were reused and passed on, so it was my job to make them lovely again for each bride... Unfortunately, the laundry closed down as there was no money to pay for the oil.

The fourth woman to be quoted also reflected warmly on the community she shared with the others, suggesting that they represented a substitute family for one another.

“

I was one of the original ladies from the Good Shepherd. [names of three other women redacted] and I are like sisters we go back such a long way. We have shared so many happy memories together here and at the convent.

XY provided written testimony about her experiences in the GSS Convent in Derry/Londonderry after she was sent there by the Sisters of Nazareth, with whom she had been placed at three years old in the 1940s. She was 16 when she arrived at the convent to work in its laundry. She recalled how, on her arrival, she was given ‘a lovely cup of tea and scones’ and that one of the Sisters ‘gave me a big hug and I immediately felt a warmth about her and the convent’. XY’s first name was then changed, and she was told that her middle name would be used to refer to her in the St Mary’s institution. There were other girls there who had also been sent by the Sisters of Nazareth, and she knew several of them.

XY remembered a ‘busy public laundry’ with perhaps 80–100 ‘girls’ working in the different departments. There was a radio playing during work, but she remembers that sometimes ‘we prayed and sang as we worked’. Her testimony corroborated what the GSS had to say about seaside trips, as XY recalled picnics with ‘sandwiches, fruit, lemonade and tea’. The musicals performed in the St Mary’s institution included *HMS Pinafore* and *My Fair Lady*. XY concluded this section of her testimony by observing that the Sisters ‘were all very good and kind to us. We were so well looked after, we were well fed and well-dressed and we were happy.’

However, XY did qualify some of this positive sentiment by explaining some upsetting experiences when a new Sister was placed in a significant position of responsibility. This development 'changed the whole atmosphere', as XY explained.

“

She was so strict and hard on us. She was narrow minded and had no heart. She took away all my confidence. She always told me I was a nobody. That I was stupid and would never be able to get a job. She treated the other girls in the same horrible way. She was the only Good Shepherd I encountered that demeaned me in this way.

XY was desperate to remove herself from the influence of this nun and to do so she found herself a job outside the convent. This was in the early 1970s when she worked in a city centre shop for three years before moving back to work in the laundry again. She later found work in a residential home.

In the late 1980s, she moved into a flat on her own but found this difficult.

“

I had been resident so long in the Convent, I felt completely alone. For the first time in nearly forty years, I was on my own. I was broken hearted, and I had no confidence. Sister [name redacted] had taken it away.

XY subsequently moved into her own home in purpose-built accommodation some years later.

In the early 2000s, PT discovered that she had an aunt who had worked in the laundry at the GSS Convent in Derry/Londonderry for several decades. Her aunt was sent there after giving birth to a baby in Stranorlar County Home, Co Donegal. PT has been unable to discover what happened to this child. She met her aunt only when she was living in sheltered accommodation next to where the St Mary's institution had been. In PT's view her aunt was left 'completely and absolutely institutionalised'. She found it difficult to gain any information from her about why she was transferred from Stranorlar to the GSS Convent.

“

If I asked her a question, she would look around like every corner of the room and listen, like...who's listening? Who's watching? And she never gave me any, like, straightforward [answer]. But she was so cautious that she thought the walls had ears, that everybody was spying on her. She wasn't paranoid, she just...that's the way she grew up.

PT also noted that there ‘was absolutely no emotion in anything she said. Absolutely, like she’s been deadened.’ When PT and her family brought her aunt out for lunches, she recalled that her aunt ‘would be scared to...to order. She just went “that’ll do me, that’ll do me”. You know? Like, I’m not entitled to a choice, just give me anything.’

PT held the view that her aunt had been under the authority of the nuns when she worked for them and that this relationship continued after the St Mary’s institution closed and even after her aunt’s death. PT explained that when they met each other, her aunt ‘was absolutely delighted that she’d found family again and almost straight away she made me...she put me down as her next of kin’. However, ‘when she died, I wasn’t allowed to see her will’. PT maintained that her aunt ‘was controlled in life and they tried to control her in her death again’. PT’s aunt had told her that she wanted to be buried in her family plot but when she tried to comply with this wish, a GSS nun told her: ‘she’s being buried with the rest of the women’. PT explained that this was in ‘like a section of a...a graveyard with little crosses but no names’. This was a reference to the area in Ardmore Cemetery outside Derry/Londonderry. When PT asked to see her aunt’s will following her death, she recalls that she was told: ‘You need to go through a solicitor for that.’

As has been the case with the others, quoted above, who spent many years in the various GSS St Mary’s institutions, PT’s aunt spoke fondly about her work in the laundry.



She talked to me about working in the laundry, you know, she regarded it as a legitimate employment in spite of the fact that she didn’t get any wages, as far as I know.

Social Worker 27 also came forward to provide testimony about the contact she had with numerous elderly former Derry/Londonderry laundry workers. She met them in her professional capacity after the GSS Convent in Derry/Londonderry was closed. Many aspects of her testimony reflected that of WB, whose testimony discussed working with a similar group of women after they left St Mary’s, Belfast and moved into specialist sheltered accommodation.

Social Worker 27 explained that at one point in her career she began to work in a specialist role with several women aged from their fifties upwards after they left St Mary’s, Derry/Londonderry and transferred to a supervised community group home. Social Worker 27 emphasised the importance of careful and sensitive transitional planning when someone is moved from a period of long-term institutionalisation into living in the community. She explained that it can be traumatic for the person if the support systems are not properly established and sustained. The women she worked with came to her caseload through the ‘learning disability’ service route, and Social Worker 27 reflected that this was the correct pathway to help the women adjust to community living as they were being supported by a multidisciplinary model of care within the community.

Social Worker 27 revealed that when her other clients were discharged from long-term institutional residence, they had significant records to assist her with the comprehensive assessment that was necessary in drawing up their individual care plans. The women

discharged from the Good Shepherd Convent, however, arrived with little to no documented history. This is an observation which tallies with the very limited information about the women that was recorded in the GSS admissions registers that the Panel has accessed. This lack of personal details was challenging for their care planning, and this was further compounded by the fact that the women felt unable to talk about their previous life.

“

I couldn't find anything [records for each woman]. There may have been, but certainly I couldn't get—, a social history for example would have been really helpful, do you know. I mean I worked with a lot of patients in long-term hospitals coming out to community care, in the early '90s, you know, so I was very familiar with that. But there would have been reams, loads of notes and files, and out of that I would have gleaned a history of where the person had been born, their family, were they still alive. I couldn't— there was nothing like that, you know. It was simply names and where they lived and that. So, it was just starting from scratch, really. Just trying to build up a relationship with the women and getting to know them. And also, the staff in the home, to build up a rapport and to build up understanding of needs, really, and trying to address those needs.

Before her time working with this client group, two women had been moved from the GSS Convent and were placed in a flat in a housing estate. A taxi brought them to the convent in the morning to continue to work in the convent and they returned to their flat in the evening. This attempt at community integration was unsuccessful and the women returned to live in the convent, commenting afterwards that they had felt frightened living in the community.

Social Worker 27 is very experienced in working with clients who had learning disabilities and although she acknowledged that she is not a psychiatrist, her view is that most of the women who had 'resided' in the Good Shepherd Convent were not learning disabled. Social Worker 27's professional view was that they had been institutionalised through many years living in isolation with a lack of contact with the outside world.

“

I have worked in the field of learning disability since [details redacted]. And part of the community care, the transition of patients in long-term hospitals into community, so got a sense of what that looks like. The majority of women, some did, I think, have a learning disability, but the majority didn't. You know. And I think it was really more around social functioning where their scores probably were lower, you know, but that was probably because of their life, the lifestyle and not having maybe the opportunities that other women of similar ages would have had. And that's where I think, that's why I think they were classified as learning disabled. They were not necessarily born with a learning disability. Generally, somebody is born with a learning disability. It's not an acquired brain injury... learning disability is something that's genetic or it's part of, maybe due to trauma at birth or something like that, you know.

She explained that most of the women were unable to talk about how they had come to live in the institution. They may have been born to mothers who had themselves been in an institutional setting. Most of the women did not have any familial relationships or contact with people from the 'outside world' as far as Social Worker 27 could recall. She did remember one woman who had contact with her siblings, but her mother had died before she had met her. Social Worker 27 brought this woman to her mother's grave, and this was an important marker for the woman, to be able to visit the burial place of the mother that she had never known.

Over time, the women began to speak more openly and to develop their own individuality. There was little mention of life in the convent apart from them remarking that there had been a lot of work and that the work was hard. The women remained close with one another and over time started to make their own decisions. Social Worker 27 cited examples of them choosing what clothing they wished to wear, venturing out to the shops and having discussions about voting in elections.

Some sense of the experiences of younger girls who were sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry was provided by the testimony of Joan O'Doherty, who volunteered to teach netball there on Sundays over several years during the late 1960s. Joan was only 15 when she began volunteering. She explained that she visited the convent 'with my mother to meet the Mother Superior, who I think might have been at school with my mother'. During this encounter, Joan's mother 'offered my services' as a netball coach.

Her recollection of the girls and women that she met on her visits to the institution is that the various women seemed to have a sense of camaraderie. Joan did not see open signs of unhappiness, although she concluded that 'certain people might want to do a bit more than they were being able to do, or allowed to'. Joan remembers the girls and young women she coached as being well groomed and dressed. They were in their late teens or early twenties. Joan recalled seeing them outside the institution.

“

...sometimes when I would be in the town of Derry, across Woolworths or across the bridge at the weekends, occasionally I would meet one or two of them, but they were always in the company of older women, never on their own.

It is possible that the older woman or women was one of the 'senior girls' or auxiliaries described by Sister 1.

Joan explained that her understanding at the time was that the girls and women were there to avoid becoming pregnant. She recalled that around 35 years ago, when being interviewed on a radio show in RoI, she used the term 'girls at risk' to describe the girls and women who were in the laundry at the Good Shepherd Convent. This is how she understood the laundry's purpose. She explained how she had come up with that term.

“

...the words ‘girls at risk’ is how I phrased it then. And that’s how I would have like, for example [name redacted] she used to tell me how she used to escape out of the house to go, I forget the band she was following, it was one of the show bands, and she used to go anywhere to see them and to listen to them. And she claimed to me that’s why she was in there to curtail her activity...my understanding was they were put in there because people thought they were at risk of getting pregnant before being married or whatever, that was as basic as I would have had it. I was never, I never gleaned, but I was very innocent, I never gleaned that they’d been taken and put in there. I did have a sense it was families just couldn’t cope, and families put them in there. I knew that some of them would like to go away, not be there. I also had a sense that some of them knew that they could earn their way out of it, and I don’t mean money-wise, but sort of prove themselves.

Joan sensed that the girls she met ‘were somewhere where they did not choose to be’. She speculated on what the ‘age of responsibility’ was at the time and suspected that it was a legal factor that was keeping them in the institution.

“

[It] might have been 21, I don’t know when it came down to 18. So maybe that was a factor, you know. How many were there over 21 you know, all that, I don’t know all that legal thing. But they were definitely somewhere where they did not choose to be, I’m under no illusions about that, they did not choose to be there. There wasn’t one of them in my opinion that walked in there and said, ‘can I come in here?’ I had a sense they were put there by whoever, I don’t know. But you know, it’s how things were done.

Joan could see that their freedoms were ‘curtailed’ but explained that she ‘didn’t have a sense of prison, if that makes sense’. Joan drew a distinction between the younger girls and the older women who were also living and working at the St Mary’s institution who she saw as she left each Sunday. Joan’s impression of these older women was that they had been there since they were teenagers and that they had no prospect of leaving.

Another woman who gave testimony about her childhood experience of visiting the GSS Convent in Derry/Londonderry was Tricia O’Hara. Her mother was formerly a nun and was friends with many religious Sisters. She continued to be a devout Catholic and was a member of the Legion of Mary. During the 1970s, when she was a young child, Tricia’s mother took her on a visit to the GSS Convent where they met with a Sister in one of the offices in the building.

Tricia recalled seeing a girl, aged about 16 or 17, wearing a blue smock and cleaning the area outside the office. She is frustrated that she did not engage in conversation to find out more about her. Tricia believes that her mother called at the convent on a social visit. However, her sister ‘thinks my mother sent clothes to the laundry at some point’. Tricia does know that her grandmother once sent a suit to be cleaned in the GSS laundry.

Tricia also recalled discussing the laundry with her father at one point. He shared his view about the young girls and women who were unfortunate enough to spend time in there. He was sympathetic to them but explained to Tricia that society treated them as 'pariahs' and that they 'had no place to go'.

20250207ZZ approached the Panel to share how her mother, who was not married, was sent to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in the 1950s, when she was in her thirties. She worked in its laundry until her death, 25 years later. She entered St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry after the birth of her fourth child. Each child was sent to children's residential institutions. Two of them who were placed in the same institution were not informed that they were siblings.

20250207ZZ went to visit her mother at one point but described her as showing no emotion. However, her mother did then begin to send Christmas and birthday cards to 20250207ZZ. She describes the meeting as very unemotional. It was in the presence of two nuns. Like others who have described meeting their mothers in the St Mary's institutions, 20250207ZZ believes that her mother was 'institutionalised'. She still has unanswered questions about her mother's life in the laundry: questions such as whether or not she was paid for the work that she did there.

20250207ZZ explained that two of her siblings lived near the GSS Convent and thinks it is 'unbelievable' there was no attempt to 'rehabilitate' her mother by moving her to independent accommodation nearby. She believes that her mother was 'imprisoned' and treated as a 'fallen woman' who was left 'physically and emotionally a broken woman'. When her mother died, she was buried in Ardmore Cemetery with an incorrect name on her headstone. A solicitor was employed to ensure that the GSS corrected that error. 20250207ZZ is angry that after 25 years 'the nuns there couldn't even get her name right'.

14.0 Where girls and women went when they left St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The records did not consistently record when girls and women left the institution or where they went after their departure. In respect of seven women nothing was recorded about their departure. For 105 others no date was provided for when they left the St Mary's institution. For at least some of these women, they will have remained in the institution until its closure in 1984, or until the closure of the residential home in 1994.

In a further 217 entries on girls and women, the detail around their departure was very basic with the words 'went out' or 'left' noted and no other information provided. In 157 cases girls and women were recorded as returning to family, and this was sometimes noted as 'taken by mother/father'. The term 'dismissed' was recorded against the names of 82 girls and women, but rarely did the notes include an explanation of why this had happened. On the few occasions when a reason was given it was related to behaviour that the GSS found themselves unable to manage. For instance, a 21-year-old woman who had spent her childhood in a Sisters of Nazareth institution was 'dismissed', after four days with the GSS in 1931, as she in their view was 'very bold and troublesome'.

Similarly, in 1946, a woman who was transferred from the Stranorlar County Home by the Sisters of Mercy (who labelled her as 'very troublesome') was 'dismissed' from the St Mary's institution after four months.

Fifty-four girls and women were transferred from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry to other religious institutions, which included other Good Shepherd institutions as well as reformatories such as Middletown in Co Armagh. Forty-five women left to receive some form of hospital medical care or to go to a mental health institution, with more than half of these women going to Gransha Hospital.

Fifty-four girls and women left to take up some form of employment. For some this was to jobs of their own choosing, while the GSS or welfare authorities arranged employment for many others. For example, an 18-year-old who spent three years in the St Mary's institution was 'taken to situation by welfare officer' in the 1950s (exact year redacted). A 17-year-old girl who had been in the institution for three years was 'sent to a place' in the 1940s (name of town and exact year redacted).

14.1 Girls and women who ran away from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

A different exit route was taken by 56 girls and women who were recorded as running away from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. These included a 15-year-old who ran away in the 1950s (exact year redacted), after only one month in the institution. Also in the 1950s (exact year redacted), the notes for another 15-year-old girl recorded 'brought by welfare. Ran away. Returned by police. Ran away again.' In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 16-year-old girl climbed out through a window and ran away. A 20-year-old woman who had come from Nazareth House in Derry/Londonderry ran away and went back there twice in a month after she had been with the GSS for two years. She was returned to the St Mary's institution on the same day.

On numerous occasions girls and women ran away together. A 16-year-old and a 17-year-old ran away to the family home of one of the girls in the 1940s (exact year redacted). One of their mothers brought the pair back to the GSS. While a parent returned her daughter on this occasion, when girls or women absconded, they were more often returned to the St Mary's institution by the police. However, it is evident (as discussed above) that unless the women or girls were in St Mary's under a court order there was no legal authority to confine them there. What is less clear is the extent to which parents might have provided the authority under which placements in the institution were carried out. The age of majority (the age at which a person becomes an adult with full legal rights) in NI was 21 until it was lowered to 18 following the Age of Majority (Northern Ireland) Act 1969.

Most of those who were returned after an escape were put back into the routine of work in the laundry. However, it appears that running away was one reason why the GSS sometimes 'dismissed' girls or women. The use of this term is informative as it implies some kind of informal work contract, even though the Laundry Trade Board had accepted the argument that those working in convent laundries should not be protected by regulations on laundry workers' wage rates. In 1937, a 15-year-old girl ran away with

two different people and was then 'sent home' by the GSS (another term for 'dismissed'). In another example, from 1943, a 22-year-old woman who had been transferred from Gransha Hospital had the term 'to be returned if troublesome' entered against her name. When she subsequently ran away, she was 'sent to the asylum', possibly referring to her being returned to Gransha Hospital. A 17-year-old girl who ran away in the 1950s (exact year redacted) was another who was 'sent home' as a result. As there are no details about what was going on in the lives of these girls and young women, it is difficult to assess what the decision-making process was on these occasions. However, two observations can be made. Firstly, the fact that these individuals were 'sent home' indicates that their confinement in the laundry was not under any court or state directive. Secondly, in that case, their families must have been influential in arranging their 'voluntary admission' and it appears that the GSS took the decision, on occasion, to return a girl or young woman to the responsibility of her family.

Not all those who absconded from the institution were returned. In the 1970s (exact year redacted), when a 16-year-old girl was confined in the St Mary's institution by Derry/Londonderry Child Welfare, it was noted in the register that she had been 'reared' in Nazareth Homes in Fahan, Co Donegal and in Derry/Londonderry. She was sent to the GSS Convent because of what were described as deteriorating relationships in her family home. After running away from St Mary's, she was apprehended by the police, having led a group of boys in stone-throwing. They returned her to the GSS, but she ran away a second time. Despite there being a warrant for her arrest, the police were unable to apprehend her.

15.0 Deaths and burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

The total number of women known to have died while in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry is 79. This figure is based upon combining data from two sources: the admission registers for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry and a list compiled by the GSS in 2019 of women who had been in this St Mary's institution and were subsequently buried in Ardmore Cemetery (herein referred to as the GSS Ardmore List). Many of the recorded deaths took place following the closure of the St Mary's institution when the women who remained in the institution were transferred to sheltered accommodation or semi-independent living managed by a housing association. Nine women appear on the GSS Ardmore List whose deaths were not noted in the admissions register.

From the admission registers, 70 deaths of women were identified in the period from 1922 onwards, the earliest death being recorded in 1927 and the last in 2019. In addition, the GSS Ardmore List, which covered the period 1922–2019, identified the place of burial of 49 women, all of whom had died between 1941 and 2019. Allowing for the duplication of 40 names which appeared in both sources, the total number of identifiable deaths is 79.

Ardmore Cemetery, which is divided into old and new sections, is attached to St Mary's Catholic Church, Ardmore parish, which is immediately to the south of Derry/Londonderry city, and approximately two miles from the GSS Convent and its former St Mary's

Institution. The GSS plots are in the new sections of the cemetery. Although the GSS report that Ardmore Cemetery was the only place of burial used by them, and that there were never any burials on the St Mary's site,⁸² none of the 11 women who are known to have died prior to 1941 while 'resident' at St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry appear on the GSS Ardmore List. Either the pre-1941 burials of women who died during their time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry took place elsewhere or there was a failure to record them in the Ardmore burial register. Based on the records the Panel has seen, the GSS do not appear to have any historical records related to arrangements with local undertakers or the purchase of cemetery plots at Ardmore.

In searching for information about nine women who came to the Panel's attention only via the Ardmore burial list, it was possible to obtain civil death registrations for eight of them; they died in the years 1944, 1951, 1960, 1965, 1978, 1980, 1981 and 1986. The one woman buried in Ardmore but for whom no death registration could be found died in 1988. Furthermore, one of the women interred in Ardmore might possibly be someone who was admitted to St Mary's but was not recorded in the admissions register. She died in 1944 aged 75, and while her address was recorded as the 'Good Shepherd Home, Londonderry', her occupation was noted as the 'widow of a labourer'. As no evidence was found to the contrary, she has been included in the list of 79 women who died while 'resident' at St Mary's.

Combining the GSS Ardmore List and the various annotations about death made in the St Mary's admissions registers established the place of burial for 55 of the 79 women. This left 24 for whom places of burial have not been identified, and 11 of these fell into the period before 1941 where no women's burials are recorded in Ardmore. However, it is known that funerals were taking place from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry as early as 1925, when the funeral of a 25-year-old woman was recorded as being the 'first funeral from the house'. No record was made of her place of burial (nor has it been possible to identify a civil death registration for her).

This leaves the question of where the remaining 24 women are interred, 11 of whom died prior to 1941. On this subject, the GSS have indicated that the remains of some women were taken home for burial by their families.⁸³ The admission registers allude to this having occurred in three instances.

Those missing from the GSS Ardmore List include several relatively young 'residents' who died after they entered St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. This includes the 25-year-old referenced above, who died in 1925 during her third year working in the laundry and was the 'first funeral from the house'. In 1926, a 20-year-old Tyrone woman, who was sent by the Sisters of Mercy, died in Omagh Hospital after eight months in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. A 14-year-old Derry/Londonderry City girl, who was placed in the institution by her family in 1930, died in 1943 after a period in hospital. A 16-year-old girl from the Irish Free State was admitted in 1934 and died in 1937. A 17-year-old girl was placed in the institution by her Donegal family in 1936 and died in 1939.

There are also some older women whose deaths are recorded in the entry register who do not feature on the GSS Ardmore List. The first of these is a 44-year-old, admitted in 1925, who died the following year. A 30-year-old, who entered the laundry in 1934, died

at an unspecified date in Stranorlar Hospital. A search across several decades of Rol's death index failed to identify a civil death registration for her. A third woman, whose age is not recorded, died in August 1941. A 71-year-old died in 1958 and she is recorded as having come to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, of her own volition, at a date that is not included in the register. A woman who entered in 1932, aged 62, died at an unrecorded date. A woman whose age is not recorded died in hospital, from tuberculosis, in 1935 after over two years working in the laundry.

Analysis of the 69 civil death certificates traced in connection with girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry indicates that the most common causes of death were various cancers, bronchopneumonia, strokes and heart problems. The majority of women for whom death certificates were traced lived beyond the age of 60. There were nine who died in their sixties, 11 in their seventies, a further 11 in their eighties and seven in their nineties. However, this point must be qualified with a cautionary reminder that 23 of the women died at ages between 16 and 59, and 11 of that number died under the age of 29. Additionally, as noted above, no death certificates have been traced for ten of the 79 women, so they are excluded from these statistics.

Burials of women at Ardmore followed a similar pattern to those for women associated with the comparable St Mary's institution in Belfast. The GSS explained that Requiem Masses took place in the chapel at the Good Shepherd Convent in Derry/Londonderry and oral testimony has supported this statement. The women were laid to rest in unmarked graves at Ardmore, though in recent years the GSS have arranged for these plots to be marked. A number of plots contain the remains of St Mary's women buried in groups of four. A larger plot hosts headstones recording the names of 19 women who died between 1978 and 1999. On the smaller plots, it appears headstones were added in more recent years to mark deaths that took place in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. One family member told the Panel that her mother's name was incorrectly recorded on the relevant headstone when first erected.⁸⁴

The *Derry Journal* newspaper was examined for evidence that any of the women's deaths appeared in its memorial and death notice columns. This was an acknowledgement that many Derry/Londonderry Catholics received in the event of their death in order to alert friends, relatives or associates to the funeral arrangements and give them the opportunity to pay their respects to the deceased. Such notices often included requests to pray for the soul of the deceased. During the mid-to-late twentieth century death notices became 'part of the funerary practices of the Irish urban and rural working classes'.⁸⁵ Local newspaper death notices offered particular importance in the cases of those individuals who had lived apart from their family for decades. However, there was no evidence of the insertion of death notices for St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry women until the mid-1990s, which was a decade later than equivalent insertions that appeared in the *Irish News* for women associated with St Mary's, Belfast. It is not clear what prompted the practice of inserting death notices for women associated with St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry or why the practice in Belfast began a decade earlier, although it was in the mid-1980s when the women in Belfast moved to live under the supervision of the staff of a sheltered residential home and ten years later when this happened at Derry/Londonderry. In responding to this issue, in 2020, the GSS suggested that the families of some deceased women 'may not have wanted death notices

published. Societal stigmas as regards St Mary's still remained.' They added that the GSS 'dealt with all deaths in an appropriate, dignified and spiritual manner'.⁸⁶

For the 79 women who are known to have died, **Table 4** sets out their year of death, age and cause of death. For those marked '§', it was not possible to state the cause of death because either no civil death registration could be found, or not enough information was recorded in the institution's records to enable a search to be undertaken for a death registration. Unfortunately, it was not a general practice to note the cause of death in the St Mary's records.

Table 4: Cause of death of women at St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Year	Age	Cause of death
1925	26	Cellulitis; septic pneumonia, in hospital four months; cardiac failure
1926§	24	Unknown
1927	27	Mania, five years; exhaustion, four months
1927	50	Mania exhaustion, one month 14 days
1927§	17	Unknown ⁸⁷
1929	24	Pulmonary tuberculosis since 13 March 1927, exhaustion
1929	19	Tubercular meningitis, 20 days
1930	19	Pulmonary tuberculosis, six months
1932	65	Chronic pulmonary necrosis
1932	24	Acute pulmonary tuberculosis, six months; exhaustion, one month
1935	34	Pulmonary tuberculosis acute, six months; tubercular laryngitis, one month
1935	27	Pulmonary tuberculosis, cardiac failure
1937	18	Influenza, one week; acute pulmonary tuberculosis, ten weeks
1941	16	Cardiac dilatation due to thyroid hypertrophy
1941	33	Cardiac failure due to chronic (dermatoid) due to meningitis
1943	24	Bronchopneumonia
1943	60	Uraemic coma due to chronic nephritis
1944	75	1. Myocardial infarction; 2. Bronchitis
1948§	Unknown	Unknown
1950	44	Pulmonary tuberculosis
1951	58	Cardiac failure due to epilepsy

Year	Age	Cause of death
1951	67	Cardiac failure due to myocardial disease
1952	44	Carcinoma of stomach
1952	91	Cardiac failure due to myocardial disease
1954	58	Cerebral thrombosis due to arteriosclerosis; chronic bronchitis
1955	40	Toxaemia due to perinephric abscess
1955	65	Acute cardiac failure due to myocardial disease
1960	44	Acute left-side cardiac failure due to hypertension due to renal failure
1960	53	Carcinoma uteri
1961	69	Coronary thrombosis
1965	71	Cardiac failure due to myocardial disease
1965	41	Carcinoma of breast
1965	60	Adenocarcinoma of cervix (radiotherapy)
1972	38	Adema carcinoma of gall bladder with secondary carcinoma of lymph node
1974	70	1a. Congestive cardiac failure, 1b. mitral stenosis and atrial fibrillation
1976	72	1a. Pulmonary embolism
1976§	53	Unknown
1976	63	1a. Peritonitis, 1b. perforation of diverticular disease
1977	73	1a. Carcinoma of stomach
1978	65	Carcinoma of cervix
1978	76	1a. Myocardial infarction
1978	53	1a. Liver secondaries, 1b. carcinoma tail of pancreas
1979	72	1a. Cardiogenic shock, 1b. acute myocardial infarction; 2. Parkinson's disease
1980	86	1a. Coronary thrombosis
1980	63	1a. Coronary thrombosis; 2. Carcinoma of stomach
1980	74	1. Bronchopneumonia; 2. Congestive cardiac failure

Year	Age	Cause of death
1981	62	1a. Cardiac asystole, 1b. inferior myocardial infarction
1982	77	1a. Cardiac failure, 1b. myocardial infarction, 1c. chronic myocardial ischaemia
1982	81	1. Bronchopneumonia; 2. Old age
1984	86	1a. Carcinomatosis
Unknown§	Unknown	Unknown
Unknown§	Unknown	Unknown ⁸⁸
Unknown§	Unknown	Unknown ⁸⁹
1986	72	1. Cerebrovascular disease
1986§	Unknown	Unknown
1988	84	1a. Gangrene of left foot, 1b. left-side hemiplegia
1988§	Unknown	Unknown
1991	78	1. Bronchopneumonia; 2. Bullous pemphigoid
1992	90	1a. Myocardial infarction, 1b. coronary thrombosis
1992	70	Coronary thrombosis
1993§	Unknown	Unknown ⁹⁰
1993	76	1a. Cerebral haemorrhage, 1b. cerebral atherosclerosis
1994	60	Carcinoma – cholangiocarcinoma of liver
1998	83	1. Acute heart failure; 2. Pneumonia
1999	93	1. Cerebrovascular accident; 2. Ischaemic heart disease, cancer of breast
2001	90	Bronchopneumonia
2002	78	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. cerebrovascular accident (certified)
2002	85	1a. Metastasis to liver, 1b. cancer of breast
2003	83	1a. Septicaemia, 1b. ovarian cancer

Year	Age	Cause of death
2005§	80	Unknown
2008	99	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. congestive cardiac failure, chronic renal failure
2009	83	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. stroke
2009	65	Breast carcinoma
2012	91	1a. Biliary sepsis, 1b. gallstone in common bile duct; 2. Hypertension, diverticular
2013	82	1a. Type 2 respiratory failure, 1b. aspiration pneumonia, 1c. severe kyphoscoliosis; 2. Chronic kidney failure
2015	87	1a. Bronchopneumonia, 1b. Alzheimer's disease, asthma
2016	97	1a. Bronchopneumonia
2019	85	1a. General debility of old age; 2. Pancreatitis chronic kidney disease

15.1 Civil death registration of girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Searches for civil death registrations for the 79 women listed in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry registers identified only 69 records, with the remaining ten not being traced based upon the information recorded in the admissions registers and the GSS Ardmore List. In all cases where death certificates were obtained, the causes of death were noted as having been certified by a medical practitioner. All the women were recorded as single, other than one (noted above) who died in 1944, a widow. The districts in which the deaths were registered are set out in **Table 5**.

Table 5: Districts of death registrations

Registration District	No.
Belfast	1
Derry/Londonderry	64
Glenties	1
Magherafelt	1
No death certificate discovered	10
Omagh	2

The occupations recorded on the 69 death certificates identified for the women are as listed below. Most recorded an occupation linked to the laundry, while a minority appear to note the occupation of some women before they had been admitted to St Mary's. In particular, this is demonstrated in the cases of 11 such registrations which recorded the deaths of six domestic servants, four factory workers and one farmer's daughter. For the majority, their occupations, as set out in **Table 6**, suggest they were seen as unpaid employees of the institution.

Table 6: Occupations recorded on death certificates

Occupation	No.
Cook	1
Factory worker	4
Domestic servant	6
Seamstress	2
Housekeeper	9
Laundry worker	26
Farmer's daughter	1
Inmate	1
Embroider/needlewoman	2
Not recorded on death certificate	15
Having no occupation	1
Widow	1

15.2 Burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Using St Mary's admission registers and the GSS Ardmore List, the information included in **Table 7** has been established regarding the burial locations for 55 of the 79 women. For more information about the particular burial grounds see the discussion of deaths and burials in the chapter on Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy, and Legal Services.

Table 7: Burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry

Burial location	No.
Ardmore Cemetery	49
Glencolmcille Cemetery, Co Donegal	1
Derry City Cemetery	1
Buried by family (location not identified)	3
Died in Derry/Londonderry – place of burial not established	18
Died in place unknown but likely Derry/Londonderry	1
Died in Stranorlar – place of burial not established	2
Died in Omagh – place of burial not established	1
Died in Donegal town – place of burial not established	1
Died in Glenties – place of burial not established	1
Died in Magherafelt – place of burial not established	1

16.0 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that, like the other two GSS St Mary's institutions, the one in Derry/Londonderry was a complex, multigenerational establishment. St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry was employed by a wide range of individuals and organisations as a residential institution for a very broad group of girls and women. As such, it offered a catch-all solution to a wide range of issues identified by social workers, probation officers, the police, GPs, members of the clergy and Catholic religious orders, and, in some cases, family members of the girls and women who were sent to the institution.

It accommodated girls and women who arrived in a range of circumstances that included those confined under probation orders or Place of Safety Orders. Some girls and women were placed there by the Special Care Committee. Others were sent to the institution after being traumatised by incest and rape because they were deemed to be in 'moral danger'. Significant numbers arrived in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry after they had given birth and spent time in a mother and baby institution; significant numbers in this group crossed the Irish border in being placed in this way. Smaller numbers arrived in the institution due to circumstances related to alcohol abuse, paramilitary rough justice or because they self-referred to the institution. The wide spectrum of girls and women accepted into the St Mary's institutions was in keeping with the GSS principle that no one deemed to be in need should be turned away by the Order.⁹¹

In evidence provided to the HIAI the GSS explained how their policy was to offer mentorship and support for girls and women in the St Mary's institutions. But this task must have been undermined by the policy of renaming new arrivals, imposing silence during meals, and punishing infringements of their rules in a cruel and demeaning fashion as judged by the HIAI.⁹²

The evidence indicates that the regime in the St Mary's institutions and in their laundries became less severe from the late 1960s onwards as the result of factors that included the impact of more liberal Catholic ideology, following the Second Vatican Council, plus increasing financial support from the welfare state. The GSS ended the practice of giving 'class names' to new arrivals in 1970. The women who worked in the St Mary's institutions and laundries began to receive modest amounts of 'pocket money' during the 1970s, which they could spend on themselves. There were also increased educational opportunities, mainly in the form of evening classes, which enabled some of them to spend time away from the convent. They were also taken on short annual holidays at local seaside towns. These were improvements on the conditions experienced by the previous generations of St Mary's women. However, judging by the weekly timetable submitted by the GSS to the HIAI, their lives were still very regulated and restricted.

From the available testimony on St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry two perspectives emerge. The written testimony of XY indicates that after transferring from the institution in which she spent her childhood, she did value numerous aspects of her life in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry despite the negative and belittling experience she had with one nun. The testimonies from Sister 1 and Sister 2 include some expression of regrets that the institution operated in the way that it did, expecting the girls and women to work without pay in its laundry. However, they maintain that this was necessary in order to finance the food and shelter that the women received.

Other testimonies are less positive. Those shared with the HIAI recalled the punishments that were imposed for 'rule-breaking' in the 1960s (and presumably earlier), and on the basis of these testimonies the HIAI judged these punishments as harsh and demeaning. Other testimonies from the relatives of women who spent time in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry raised concerns that also appear in the chapters on St Mary's, Belfast and St Mary's, Newry. The individuals who shared these testimonies asked why their mother (or aunt) had spent such a long period of time at St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry without contact with family outside the institution. In this respect, family members were joined by Social Worker 27 in reflecting on the impact of institutionalisation on these women and what they described as their loss of independence and autonomy. This chapter (and the others on each institution that is reviewed in this report) has commented on the brevity of the notes recording the lives of the girls and women in the institutions. In the case of the St Mary's institutions this sometimes ran into several decades, and yet when Social Worker 27 and her colleagues began to work with the remaining women from the institution after its closure, they discovered virtually no record of their lives.

As was the case with some of the other GSS institutions, the public inquiry may wish to carry out further investigation around details of burials and death certification for some of the women connected to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry for whom it has not been possible to locate this information.

Chapter 4

The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's
Institution and Laundry, Newry



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** Sources used in writing this chapter
- 2.0** Historical background to St Mary's, Newry
- 3.0** What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Newry
- 4.0** How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Newry
- 5.0** How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Newry
- 6.0** What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary's, Newry
- 7.0** Where did the girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Newry come from
- 8.0** Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Newry
- 9.0** What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Newry
- 10.0** What was daily life like in St Mary's, Newry
- 11.0** Where girls and women went when they left St Mary's, Newry
- 12.0** Deaths and burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Newry
- 13.0** Conclusion

Readers' advisory

Readers of this chapter are reminded that when quoting from historical records, newspaper reports and other contemporary sources, it is necessary to use the terminology and language that was used at the time. The Panel is aware that such terms can be upsetting and unacceptable and that they would not be used today. These terms are used as little as possible in all the chapters of this report but may appear in quoted sections. It is important to make the point that institutional records and reports are reflective of the creator's viewpoint and should not be considered conclusive nor definitive of the practices and processes of the institution. Nor should they be considered to be evidential or impartial in relation to the institutions themselves or the women and girls who were admitted to them. This report discusses issues that readers will find upsetting. These include subjects such as incest, rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, family separation and poor mental health.

In terms of testimonies, when speaking about their personal history, some individuals quote the terms that were derogatorily used about them or their children in the past. We will quote these terms as they appear in the testimonies cited.

The written records relating to the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Newry present a partial account of the institution, how it was run, and the lives of the women and girls who stayed there. The lack of detail captured in short case notes on the individual women and girls who entered the institution leaves numerous questions either partially answered or not addressed at all. This is particularly true in terms of the emotional inner lives and family details of the girls and women who entered the institution. Recording testimonies from some of those women takes us beyond the brevity and formulaic information that is offered in the archival sources. At times, the testimonies offer more contrasting perspectives on the nature and functions of this institution to those suggested by written records.

1.0 Sources used in writing this chapter

The GSS made available a significant amount of material in relation to St Mary's, Newry. This consisted of:

- admission records (one register covering the period from 1946 to 1982)
- 11 individual admission files (from dates between 1967 and 1978).

Testimony has been taken from several sources:

- the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (HIAI) (2014–17)¹
- testimony shared in 2018–19 for use in the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) report (2021)²
- testimony shared with the Truth Recovery Independent Panel (IP) (2024–25).

2.0 Historical background to St Mary's, Newry

The historical background to the GSS St Mary's institutions and their laundries is explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries. St Mary's, Newry operated between 1947 and 1984. It was located at 132 Armagh Road, Newry, Co Down. Also on the site was the GSS Marianvale Mother and Baby Institution, Newry, which operated between 1955 and 1984.



St Mary's, Newry, photo supplied and permission to use from private collection

3.0 What is known about the finances of St Mary's, Newry

The available financial records are limited in scope for the St Mary's institution in Newry. The information for St Mary's, Newry overlaps with that related to Marianvale. In 1977, the combined income of both these institutions was £48,287 and expenditure was £42,530, leaving a surplus of £5,752. The following year, a loss was made, with income of £49,483 and expenditure of £56,049 creating a deficit of £6,565. The combined surplus from the laundry and donations made to the GSS in Newry that year appears to have been £7,900. A further £2,556 of income came from the farm attached to this institution. In 1978, a sum of £509 was paid for 'Farm/Garden Wages'. It is possible that this was for employees who came from the local community to carry out seasonal tasks on the farm.

The limited financial records also captured some of the financial contributions to the GSS in Newry made by statutory agencies. In February 1956, for example, the County Tyrone Welfare Committee agreed to make a payment to the Good Shepherd Convent of £50. Previously, this welfare committee had rejected applications for funding, and this sum was lower than the £96 the Association of Welfare Committees suggested that each county welfare committee contribute to the GSS at Newry for their work with girls and women placed with them by social services staff from each of the counties. The following

year, the GSS asked the same committee for another £50. It was reported that Tyrone's children's officer 'found the convent very helpful'. However, a decision was postponed pending further 'information on its use for Tyrone women and children'. It is not clear if this referred to Marianvale or St Mary's, Newry or perhaps both.³

The state financed the costs of girls and women sent there by the courts or the various local welfare committees that operated across Northern Ireland (NI). The records of an 18-year-old admitted in 1971 explained that she received £6 a week in benefits from which she was to pay £4.80 to the GSS and keep £1.20 (20%) for pocket money. The welfare authorities would then pay the additional £2.70 a week to make it up to the £7.50 that the GSS charged per week for her food and accommodation.

Two GSS, who gave testimony as Sister 1 and Sister 2 for the QUB and UU report in 2021, argued that the costs of feeding and clothing girls and women who were not sent to their institutions by the various state bodies were covered by the money that was earned by the commercial laundry. On the issue of receiving funding for those sent to the laundry, Sister 1 said it was not available 'for the elder girls and not for the ones who came in without social services' support'. Sister 2 said of these women: 'Yes, they did work in a laundry, so did we. And that was their only source of income, there was no government subsidy for them, so where would we get the money to do that [feed and clothe them], you know?'

However, Sister 1 suggested that there was a shift in financial arrangements in the early 1970s which altered elements of life for the women working in the laundry.

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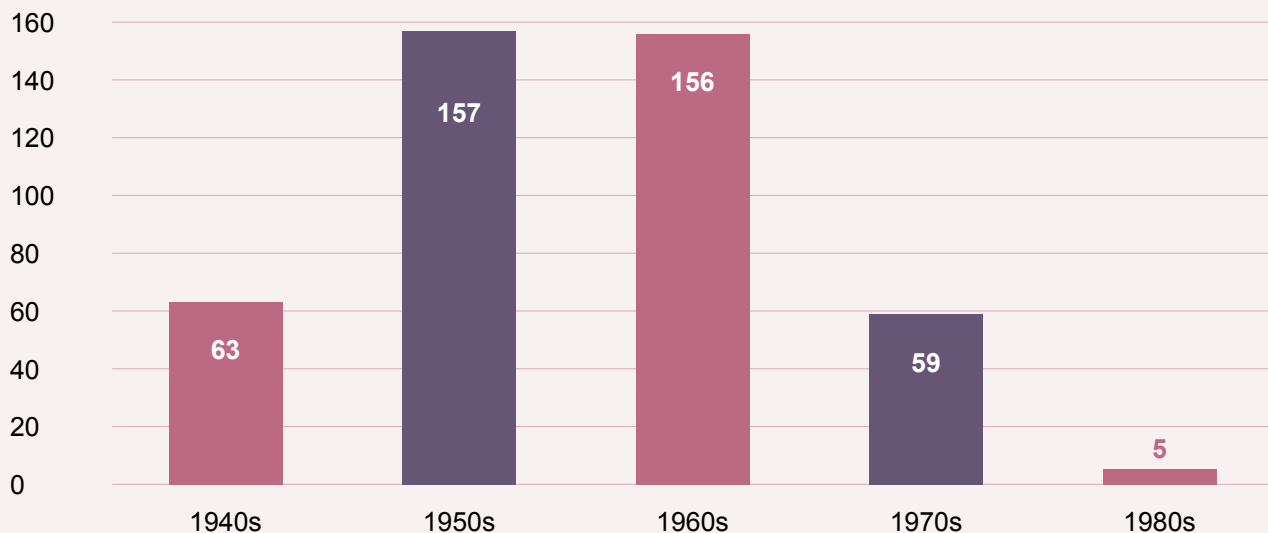
...there was reorganisation of Social Services in 1973 under the Seebohm Report⁴ and...there was more grants given to the Sisters, more money and the Sisters...were able to do more for the girls, so they say. They ran more classes and they [the women in the laundry] were able to go out and get employment then. [The Sisters] had money to pay for the employees that came in.

This last point was a reference to the fact that the GSS began to employ paid staff who came into the Newry laundry (and the ones in Belfast and Derry) in the 1970s.

4.0 How many girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Newry

St Mary's, Newry was the smallest of the three such institutions operated in NI by the GSS and it operated for the shortest time. Between 1947 and 1982, a total of 450 women and girls were admitted into the institution. There are ten individuals for whom no date of admission was recorded. The number of admissions for which a date was recorded, per decade, is set out in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Number of girls and women who were admitted to St Mary's, Newry per decade, 1947–82



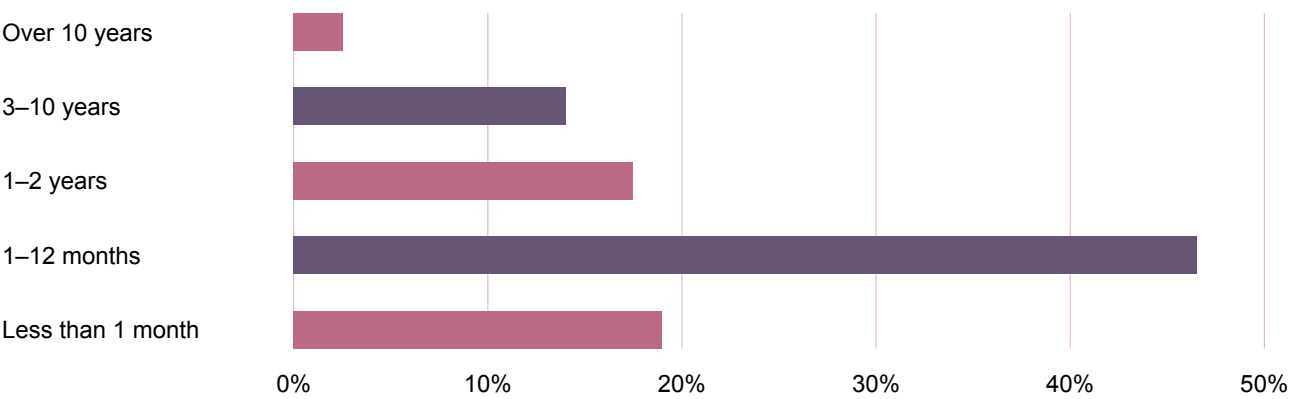
5.0 How long did girls and women stay in St Mary's, Newry

As was the case in the other St Mary's institutions, the duration over which girls and women remained in St Mary's, Newry varied greatly. Moreover, the limited information recorded in the register does make it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions.

There are 71 women and girls for whom their length of stay is unclear, and 20 who had multiple entries and exits, with one woman having entered the institution on six different occasions. The length of stay for the 379 girls and women for whom this information was recorded is set out in **Figure 2**.

Ten women were recorded as spending over ten years in St Mary's, Newry. For example, one woman was recorded as being admitted as a 13-year-old in 1947 and dying in November 1980 aged 46, having spent 33 years in the institution.

Figure 2: Length of time girls and women stayed in St Mary’s, Newry



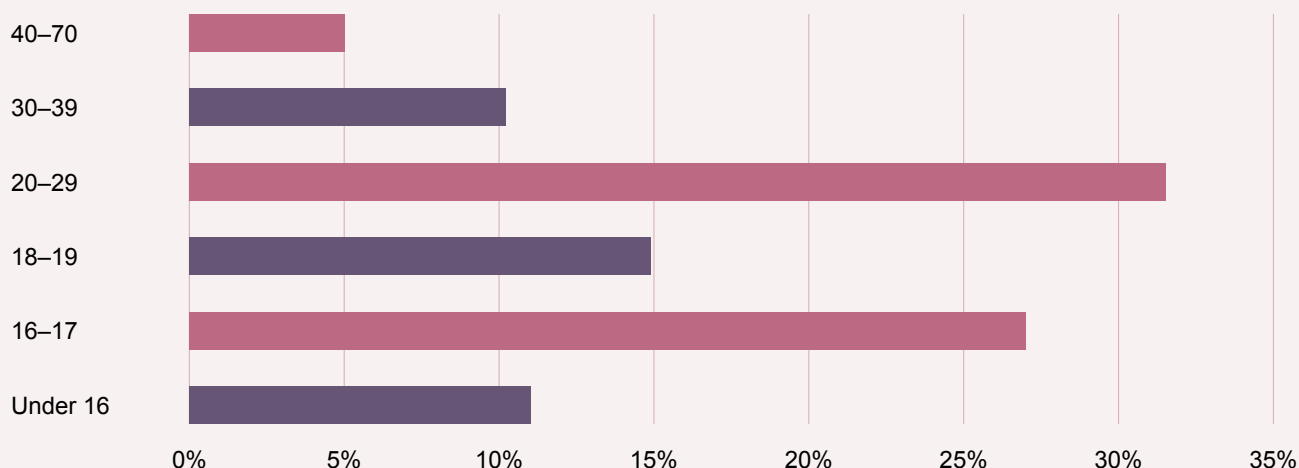
	Less than 1 month	1-12 months	1-2 years	3-10 years	Over 10 years
No. of girls and women	73	176	67	53	10
%	19.3	46.4	17.7	14.0	2.6

6.0 What age were girls and women when they were admitted to St Mary’s, Newry

The Newry admissions register did not routinely record a date of birth for all those who entered the institution. For 189 of the 450 who were admitted, no date of birth was recorded. The ages of the 261 girls and women for whom a date of birth was recorded is set out in **Figure 3**. From the available information, 100 (38.3%) were under 18 when they were admitted. The youngest recorded admissions were two ten-year-old children who were admitted in 1957 and 1967 respectively. One was sent from the GSS Convent in Belfast and returned there after six months. The second child was sent by Miss 3, who was a probation officer, and remained for six weeks before being transferred to ‘Belfast’, after which no further detail was recorded.

The oldest woman admitted to the institution was a 67-year-old who arrived in Newry in 1967 and was transferred to GSS St Mary’s Institution and Laundry, Derry/Londonderry in 1984 when she was aged 84.

Figure 3: Age of girls and women admitted to St Mary's, Newry



	Under 16	16–17	18–19	20–29	30–39	40–70
No. of girls and women	29	71	39	82	27	13
%	11.1	27.2	14.9	31.4	10.3	5.0

The HIAI report discussed the number of under-age girls (under-18-year-olds) who were in St Mary's, Newry. It stated that while it was difficult to establish how many girls under 18 had been sent to this institution, it concluded that in the 1950s 'there were often only two girls, and in the 1960s there were usually between two and four girls and in the 1970s there were usually five girls'. However, examining the registers for St Mary's, Newry and choosing a random date for each decade suggests that the number was higher. In 1956, there were seven under-18s recorded; in 1966, eight girls were under 18; and six girls were under 18 in 1976. An inspection report written in 1958 recorded two girls under 18, although the register would suggest that there were four girls who were under 18.⁵ It appears that there is a discrepancy between the numbers of girls that the state assumed were in the institution and what the register recorded, leading the HIAI to employ inaccurate data.

State inspections of St Mary's, Newry that were carried out during the 1970s concluded that it admitted limited numbers of the very youngest girls. By this they meant those aged under 15. The school-leaving age was 15 until 1972. This is borne out in the registers, as 13 girls under 15 were sent to the institution between 1951 and 1973. In her report in June 1973, Miss 2 of the Ministry of Home Affairs described the educational arrangements for the girls in St Mary's, Newry.

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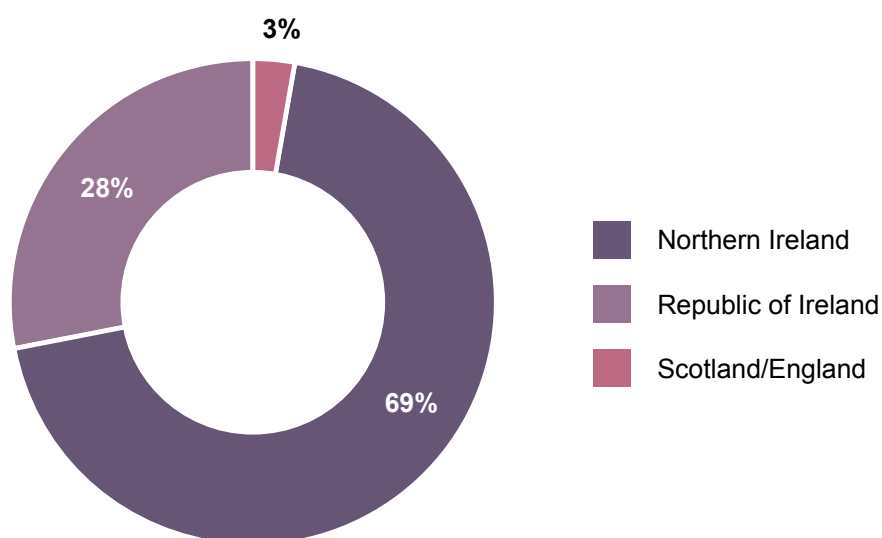
Five girls were in the fifteen–eighteen years range, one of whom was in Special Care, while four were the responsibility of Welfare Authorities. One girl attends the Grammar School and another the Technical School in Newry. They are full-time students, but some other girls attend various classes in the Technical School.⁶

Another inspection report, written in 1976, included the comment that St Mary’s, Newry ‘would not normally take in school age girls because of travel difficulties’.⁷ Bernadette Ross, who was 14 when she was sent to St Mary’s in 1972, travelled in one of the laundry delivery vans to the grammar school she was attending. She was also expected to work part-time in the laundry, sometimes in the late afternoon after school or during school holidays. This was suggested initially that Bernadette be placed in St Joseph’s Training School in Middletown, Co Armagh, which was an institution operated by the Sisters of St Louis. It was the usual destination for school-age girls who were detained under court orders. However, Bernadette recalled that there was no suitable educational provision for her in Middletown, so she was sent to the GSS in Newry. Placing Bernadette in Newry also meant that she was in the same institution as her sister, who was sent there at the same time under a court order.

7.0 Where did the girls and women admitted to St Mary’s, Newry come from

The registers record the previous address of 270 of the girls and women admitted to St Mary’s, Newry. The percentage of these individuals whose previous address was in NI, the Republic of Ireland (RoI), or Scotland/England is set out in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4: Address of girls and women before they were admitted to St Mary’s, Newry



Given the location of Newry, it is perhaps not surprising that a large proportion (43%) of the girls and women came from Counties Armagh, Down and Tyrone. The proximity to the border no doubt was a factor in 10% of admissions having addresses in Counties Cavan, Louth and Monaghan. A further 12% of those placed in this institution came from Belfast addresses. Those from the six counties that made up NI represented over two-thirds of the total and ROI slightly less than one-third. The remaining small proportion were from England and Scotland.

8.0 Who sent girls and women to St Mary's, Newry

When the GSS were approached in 2018 to provide a statement about the three St Mary's institutions and their laundries, they offered the following explanation for how girls and women entered these institutions. They reflect a combination of the original aims of the GSS in the nineteenth century with the increased role of the welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century. The GSS outlined the Order's 'mantra': that 'nobody in need would be turned away'. They also provided a list of 'the most common reasons for an admission', which were:

1. domestic violence
2. homelessness and lack of family support (e.g., former care home children)
3. vulnerability – girls described in that era as being in 'moral danger' or registered as 'special care'
4. former 'residents' of the mother and baby institution who were vulnerable and for whom no alternative placements were available
5. Legion of Mary.

The GSS added that the facilities they offered 'were well known throughout society and statutory agencies'. Among those making 'referrals' were GPs, social services and parish priests. They also maintained that some women 'simply turned up on the doors of the Convent seeking refuge and assistance'.⁸

The majority of the girls and women (64%) who were sent to St Mary's, Newry were referred to the institution by members of the clergy or religious organisations. These included 51 women who were referred by a priest, eight women who were referred by the Legion of Mary, and at least 150 girls and women who were referred by various other religious orders. The largest of these orders was the GSS themselves, who transferred large numbers of girls and women to St Mary's, Newry. They sent 47 individuals from the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Belfast; 22 from their Limerick convent; 13 from Cork; eight from Waterford; six from Derry/Londonderry; three from New Ross; and 15 from Dunboyne, which was a mother and baby institution. Other orders which transferred women and girls to Newry included the Sisters of St Louis, the Mercy Sisters, the Poor Clares and the Sisters of Nazareth. A total of 69 girls and women were sent from the

GSS mother and baby institutions in NI (67 came from Marianvale and two from the GSS Marianville Mother and Baby Institution, Belfast).⁹

One of those transferred to St Mary's, Newry was the birth mother of 20250304FQ. This woman had been in GSS institutions in RoI since childhood. At some point, she was transferred to Newry before leaving the institution to work independently in a city in RoI. She became pregnant there and then returned to Newry and entered Marianvale. After she gave birth to 20250304FQ, the baby was transferred to St Joseph's Babies' Home, Belfast, which was operated by the Sisters of Nazareth. The young birth mother remained at the convent in Newry, her records noting that she 'will do so until the final adoption arrangements are made'. 20250304FQ explained.

“

I don't know if she got to see me or not, but it says after the birth she'd be going back to Saint Mary's which is the laundry part of it, of Marianvale, or Newry. So possibly, I don't know what the confinement was or, that's something we'd have to find out from her side.

Welfare committees (known later on as social services) are noted as referring at least 49 women, and this number included those girls sent by the courts under Fit Person Orders. Following the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1950, the courts obtained new responsibilities to consider children's 'care' and welfare. For the first time, the police, a local welfare committee or authorised person (in effect the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC]) could bring a child before the juvenile courts if they believed they required 'care and protection'. The Act established the welfare committees as a 'fit person' for this purpose.¹⁰

Six women were admitted under 'special care' orders. The Mental Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1948 gave the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority responsibility for persons requiring 'special care' to be overseen by a new Special Care Authority.¹¹ As they had done before this Act, the three GSS St Mary's institutions continued to accept 'special care' girls and women into the institution, where they worked in the laundries. In this regard the institutions were not only multigenerational, they accommodated a complex range of girls and women with varying needs and vulnerabilities.

A further three girls or women were brought to St Mary's, Newry by police officers. It is likely that these girls or women were discovered alone on the streets late at night without accommodation and deemed to be at risk by the police. In cases like this, it appears that the Royal Ulster Constabulary identified the three GSS convents as a convenient source of crisis accommodation for girls or women.

Forty-seven women had 'voluntary' recorded against their entry information. It is possible that they came on their own with no other person or organisation involved. However, it has been noted that in England the term 'voluntary' was used in cases where family members brought a girl or woman to a GSS institution. In these cases, 'voluntary' may have referred to an absence of state funding.¹² The GSS maintain that the term 'voluntary' on the records might indicate that 'a discussion on options' had taken place.¹³

Eleven women were recorded as being brought (or sent) to the institution by family members and 11 were referred by employers, 'friends' or other named individuals. This included seven women and girls in 1948 who were referred by the Master of the Newry Union Workhouse. All Workhouses closed that year and it seems that the Newry Union Workhouse's remaining Catholic female 'inmates' were sent the short distance to St Mary's, Newry to work in the laundry.

9.0 What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to St Mary's, Newry

The notes recorded in the admissions register are very brief and offer limited detail on the reasons why women and girls were admitted. There was no column or recording protocol specifically for explaining the reason for admission. However, there were some statistics that appear to have been gathered in 1965 which do record reasons for admission and other information about the women and girls in St Mary's, Newry. They provide insights on how the GSS classified admissions. There are also some additional individual files which provide more information on a small number of women and girls. Testimonies of women and girls who were in St Mary's, Newry also provide more detailed information on why they were admitted as well as their experiences there.

9.1 Girls and women recorded as having disabilities or mental health issues who were admitted to St Mary's, Newry

The admission notes about 14 women and girls suggest that they were vulnerable with a history of treatment for mental health issues and hospitalisation at some point before. The details of their conditions were not made clear in the records and it is not known if they were having treatment prior to their admission to St Mary's, Newry. One woman who stayed for a week in the 1940s (exact year redacted) was described as 'mentally deficient: troublesome'. Another woman in the same year was recorded as having 'got strange in her behaviours and left. Afterwards sent to mental home.' Four women were sent to St Luke's Hospital in Armagh for temporary treatment.

The notes of one woman from the 1970s record how she was described as a 'chronic schizophrenic' who had 'deteriorated over recent months', with the psychiatrist explaining that 'unfortunately the Nuns misinterpreted my recommendations when I saw her and took no particular action'. The woman was admitted to St Luke's, and her notes further explain that she had been in a psychiatric hospital in Dublin and the experience there had left her 'very scared of admission to hospital'. Her admission to the hospital was with a 'view to enhancing her social acceptance in the Convent' and her 'management was successfully directed towards this in that the Nuns were pleased with her readiness to converse with people'.

Ten women and girls who were admitted had the term 'not able to fend for herself' ascribed to them by the GSS nun who wrote their entries in the entry register. It is not clear what this means, but in some cases seems to imply a learning difficulty or mental or physical health issues. One woman admitted in the 1940s (exact year redacted) was described as 'not able to fend for herself – below average intelligence'. In another case in

the 1960s (exact year redacted), a woman described as ‘not able to fend for herself’ was admitted to St Luke’s Hospital. On the notes of a woman admitted in the 1940s (exact year redacted), it had been written: ‘Not able to fend for herself – Dumb and illiterate.’

Four women were described as ‘unable to cope’ on the explanation for their admission. It is not clear what this meant. One 31-year-old woman, who had been referred by the NSPCC in the 1960s (exact year redacted), and another woman, who entered the institution aged 26 in the 1950s (exact year redacted), were both described by the nun writing their admission notes as ‘unable to cope’.

In the additional notes in 1965 for the 35 girls and women then in the institution, 15 of them were described as having ‘below average intelligence’, three were described as ‘illiterate’ and two adult women were referred to as ‘childish’.

9.2 Girls and women who were recorded as ‘special care’ and admitted to St Mary’s, Newry

Over the course of the history of St Mary’s, Newry, seven women and girls were placed by the Special Care Committee for people certified as having ‘special care’ needs.¹⁴ Four of these women and girls were ‘sent’ or ‘returned’ to Tower Hill in Armagh, which was a ‘special care’ facility. One other was sent to Muckamore Special School in Co Antrim. They ranged in age from a 50-year-old woman in the 1950s (exact year redacted) to a 13-year-old girl in the same decade. A 16-year-old girl was admitted in the 1970s (exact year redacted) from the GSS Convent complex in Belfast. Her records are one of the few to offer more extensive insights into the circumstances of her life. However, it is important to note that they are written *about* her and contain no detail on her lived experience. On her notes, the record-keeper had written: ‘might benefit from a short period of training in a residential setting’. The training in the St Mary’s institution in Newry would have centred on work in its laundry, although by the 1970s the GSS offered some educational opportunities and some women went out to evening classes at a technical college.

This girl had been in care since she was a small child before being admitted to the GSS Convent in Belfast when she was 15 after her foster placement had failed. According to the notes, she had difficulty keeping a job, and the social welfare officer described her as spending ‘all her free time lazing around and smoking; giving cheek to her girl companions as well as to the Sisters and always appeared very sullen and bad-tempered’. When she left the GSS Convent in Belfast and went to Derry/Londonderry without informing anyone of her plans, this resulted in her being ‘transported to the Good Shepherd Convent, Newry’. Her social worker explained that she had shown an ‘inability to function adequately in an adult setting’ and that if she ‘fails to adjust following this proposed training period, psychological assessment might be considered necessary’. This did take place and she was assessed and taken under the supervision of the Special Care Committee on an informal basis while remaining in St Mary’s, Newry.

Also admitted under ‘special care’, in the 1970s (exact year redacted), was a 17-year-old girl. Her family life was ‘not good’, and she had run away from home. The notes compiled in her file summarised the note taker’s impressions.



[She] requires supervision...She is inclined to let others do the work for her. She needs a firm hand coupled with kindness and the awareness that she is wanted and can be a person like other girls her own age.¹⁵

The issue of using contemporary notes, like this one, from institutional sources is that they only provide the perspective of the individual Good Shepherd Sister or the social worker who wrote them. It is usually not possible to obtain a perspective from those who are the subject of this administrative 'gaze'. However, following the publication of the QUB and UU report in 2021, in which this 17-year-old girl was first discussed, two sisters – Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross – came forwards to share testimony with the Panel. They had worked in the laundry with the girl referred to and were angered by what they had read about her and felt she was misrepresented. They were deeply saddened that she was described in the records as someone who allowed others to do her work. Mary and Bernadette made clear their view that she was not 'lazy' and that her disabilities prompted other girls and women to volunteer 'to do her work in the laundry'.¹⁶

9.3 Girls and women considered to be in 'moral danger' sent to St Mary's, Newry

The term 'moral danger' or 'in grave moral danger' was used in eight cases in the admissions register in 1965, although no details about the nature of the danger were provided. However, as was outlined in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, the term was associated with those at risk of sexual abuse or exploitation. It is evident that the GSS viewed themselves as having a role in providing a place of 'protection'. In assessing this category of 'moral danger', they might be joined by the parents of the girls or young women involved, priests, or social workers. In this context, society operated a highly gendered system which supervised the sexuality and behaviour of girls and women and was not concerned with similar behaviour of boys and men. The potential long-term impacts of this gendered discrimination – which for some led to long-term institutionalisation – are discussed in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, which reflects on Mary Stuart's work with long-term convent laundry 'residents' that was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s.

Of the eight instances where 'moral danger' was recorded in the St Mary's, Newry records, the individuals involved were between 16 and 18, with one exception of a 23-year-old who was described as being 'in moral danger and unable to take care of self'. Details of one occasion where the reason for admission was 'moral danger' were found in local newspapers published in the 1950s (exact year redacted). This rare media coverage only came about because of a legal case involving a teenage girl. This girl was the subject of a habeas corpus application from her mother that was directed towards her parish priest and the girl's father. This was a legal action that required a person who was being detained to be brought before a judge in a bid to secure their release. The judge was tasked with assessing the legality of the person's detention.

In this case, a newspaper reported that the priest who was involved in the supervision of this young person's life 'had her removed to a home run by the Sisters of the Good

Shepherd at Newry'. It understood that he 'took this action because he considered her to be in moral danger'. The court application was adjourned by the High Court in Belfast 'as mother and father agreed the child could enter Good Shepherd Convent in Newry' for 12 months. When those 12 months had passed, the teenage girl's mother returned to court to again apply for custody of her daughter and her release from the GSS Convent in Newry. The mother's legal arguments were opposed by the lawyer representing the parish priest. Newspapers reported that two High Court judges decided to speak privately to the teenage girl who was being confined at St Mary's, Newry. Apparently speaking to her privately was 'contrary to the usual practice'. The girl was 'accompanied to the Court by one of the nuns of the Good Shepherd Convent and was interviewed in Chambers'. It is not recorded what she was asked by the judges, who else was present or if she was asked what she wanted to happen to her next.

When the matter returned to the court and was once again open to newspaper coverage, it was revealed that the welfare officer assigned to work the case reported to the court that 'he was not satisfied that the girl should be sent back to the family', by which he presumably meant her mother (the girl's parents were living apart). The judge stated that 'neither the father nor the mother, was in the opinion of the court, in a fit position to have custody of the child' and that she would 'be going where the welfare authority could look after her' until she was 18.¹⁷ Unfortunately, none of the newspaper reports explained what authority the priest had in this case and why the teenage girl's mother's request was overruled by the welfare committee and the court. Following the court case, the teenager went to the Sacred Heart Home run by the GSS in Belfast before leaving there after four months.

A witness who gave testimony to the HIAI explained that the reason why she was admitted to St Mary's, Newry was never made clear to her, although she vaguely understood that it was for her 'protection'. HIA202 was 15 when she was admitted in the 1970s, and she recalled how her parish priest came to her home to inform her mother that she should go to the GSS laundry in Newry 'for training'. She told the HIAI: 'I have never known the real reason why I was put into the Good Shepherd. I may have been talking to soldiers innocently and my mother might have worried.'¹⁸

9.4 Girls and women who had been pregnant outside of marriage and were sent to St Mary's, Newry

The term 'unmarried mother' only appears on the main admissions register once. However, in the additional information recorded about the 35 girls and women who were in St Mary's, Newry in 1965, the term 'unmarried mother' is listed as the reason for the placement of '18 girls'. As outlined earlier in this chapter, at least 69 girls and women were transferred directly from Marianvale or Marianville shortly after giving birth. The trauma of having spent time in a mother and baby institution, being separated from your baby and being sent to work in a laundry soon after giving birth must have been very significant. In testimonies shared with the Panel about all three of the GSS St Mary's institutions, women have said that they had no choice about transfer to a St Mary's institution and were unclear about the length of time they would have to remain working in its laundry. The GSS dispute that this was the case and provided the following comment.



[The GSS] would provide a sanctuary with St Mary's for women who needed them...Women went there in accordance with the individual need. The alternative was often homelessness.

In referencing potential homelessness, the GSS were noting that breakdown in family relationships left the girls and women unable to return to their family home.

OC, who gave testimony on her mother's experiences of this institution, explained that her mother was raped at the age of 14. She was then sent to Marianville by her parish priest. This was during the 1950s. Following the birth of her son and his adoption, she was sent to St Mary's, Newry, where she remained for seven years. Her written pleas to her father, a widower, that she be allowed to return home were rejected until he was on his deathbed.

The belief that time spent in St Mary's, working in the laundry, would be beneficial after having a baby was expressed by a priest in 1968, who suggested that one woman be sent on a pathway from Marianvale to St Mary's, Newry.



[She should be] received into the classroom for a short time after the baby's adoption in order that she may have an opportunity to reorient herself and prepare herself properly for her return to the outer room and a more orderly life from now on.¹⁹

The implication was that this woman needed 'retraining' and time to 'reform' her behaviour by spending time in the 'penitents' class'. There is no evidence on this woman's record that she had any input on this decision to confine her in St Mary's, Newry. She was 23 years old and was not subject to any legal parental authority, which might have enabled her parents to agree with the priest's view and ask the GSS to move their daughter between the two institutions within the Newry convent. There is also no record of the amount of time that this woman should spend in the 'classroom' in order to 'reorient' herself. (As explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries, the GSS use the term 'the class' to describe the part of the convent that included its commercial laundry.)

However, the GSS disagree with this interpretation and offered an alternative view.



Some women, without alternative accommodation, will have been offered a place in St Mary's after the birth of her baby. There was no capacity to provide for these women in Marianvale but it was recognised that they required pastoral support, shelter and provision. There was no element of 'penance' associated with entry.²⁰

20250404BL gave testimony that explained that her birth mother was sent to St Mary's, Newry and worked in the laundry for two to three years. Her uncertainty over the precise length of time is based on her birth mother being unable to speak in detail about her time in St Mary's, Newry. She has spoken a little more about Marianvale, where she was sent after becoming pregnant as the result of rape when she was 24. 20250404BL explained what happened after that.

“

Her mother and the parish priest took her in the car and drove her to Newry to Marianvale, but at the time she didn't know where she was going but she basically told me she had no choice and that her father didn't know because her mother was afraid of what her father would do. So, she said she was scared, she had no choice... she said, 'I couldn't keep you, I wanted to but I had epilepsy and I had no support and I was told that I had to give you up' and then she said, 'And I stayed there for between two and three years' [in the laundry]...And then her sister came and took her home. And she said she came back to [County 1 in Rol] and moved back in with her parents at the time and worked away in the farm as if nothing had happened.

Of particular concern to the GSS were women who had been pregnant more than once. The St Mary's, Newry admissions register does not use the term 'offender'. This is a term used in other GSS records: for example, to label a woman who had been pregnant twice as a 'second offender'. One of the Good Shepherd Sisters, Sister 2, shared testimony outlining the Order's rationale on this matter. She recalled instances where unmarried women were placed in a GSS laundry following the birth of their second child.

“

...the whole thinking behind it was look, that woman is not capable of independent living at all, she'll be back to us again or somewhere else, you know?

9.5 Girls and women who were sent by the courts to St Mary's, Newry

The issue of protection and concerns about 'moral welfare' was led by those making the decisions about the court orders that confined women and girls in St Mary's, Newry. However, unlike the GSS St Mary's institutions in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, where a small number of women were sent as an alternative to prison by the courts, this does not appear to have happened in Newry.

Five women and girls were admitted under a court order. In the case of a 14-year-old girl, recorded in the 1960s (exact year redacted), the notes simply stated '(Welfare) Court Order', which suggests this was probably a Place of Safety Order. In two cases the notes reference Miss 3, who was a probation and welfare officer. In one example, a 20-year-old who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted) was found to be pregnant and three months later she 'went down to the Vale' (meaning Marianvale). The other time where Miss 3 was involved was in the case of a 16-year-old girl who was sent to the institution in the 1960s (exact year redacted). This girl had been admitted to St Mary's,

Belfast one year earlier under the condition that she would remain there for one year as 'a young person having a parent not exercising proper care and guardianship and is beyond control'. The report on her situation maintained that she had been keeping 'company with pop groups and kept very late hours. She ran away from home and had been staying in undesirable flats.' After being sent to St Mary's, Belfast, she ran away four times, taking other girls with her on three occasions. She had then gone to Miss 3's house and given herself up and was then sent by the court to St Mary's, Newry, where she stayed for another six months.

The fact that Miss 3 appears on a relatively few occasions in the GSS records supports the view that the GSS convents were being used less in probation and remand cases by the 1970s. This was certainly the opinion of three retired probation officers who gave testimony about this.²¹ According to a short history of the Probation Service in NI, both the impact of the Troubles and a 'new professionalism' had a 'radical influence on the manner of delivering' probation services.²²

Two teenage sisters (Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross), who were then aged 14 and 15, were sent to St Mary's, Newry under court orders in 1972. Unlike many other examples used in this report, it is possible to offer their perspective on what was written about them at the time by social workers and the GSS. This is the case because they featured in the QUB and UU report and recognised themselves even though they had been anonymised. They strongly disagreed with how they and others were described in the GSS and social work reports that were quoted in the report. This motivated them to share their testimony and alternative perspective with the Panel, which is incredibly valuable.

Their involvement demonstrates two things. First, it is dangerous to assume that the written records represent a version of events that would be accepted by the girls and women about whom the records were compiled. Second, it demonstrates also that the GSS (and social workers) who compiled those notes had different viewpoints and perspectives to the girls and women about whom they created the institutional records.

Mary's and Bernadette's testimonies offer alternative viewpoints to those recorded in the St Mary's files, and they dispute strongly the accuracy of the written records. Their testimonies offer a much deeper understanding of how they arrived at St Mary's, Newry and about their life and working in its laundry. They also offer a vital perspective on the reality of what daily life involved there. Both testimonies convey a sense of what the historian Pamela Cox describes as being 'subjects' who were acted upon rather than having any agency themselves.²³

Bernadette was then 14 and Mary was 15 when they were sent to St Mary's, Newry under a Fit Person Order, as the court deemed them to be 'in need of care, protection or control namely, as a young person who is beyond the control of her parents'. The official records about Mary and Bernadette suggest that they were admitted because St Mary's was judged to be a place of both safety and correction. Their notes suggest that 'intensive casework' by their social worker had failed to put a halt to the 'bad behaviour' which, it was suggested, had caused their father to approach social services. In their case, the 'bad behaviour' centred on the fact that they had attended soldiers' discos in Belfast. Their file noted that their 'delinquency has placed them in some danger in their

home area'. This was an understatement, as it went on to reveal that as 'a last warning', Mary 'had her hair cut by extremist elements'. Even before this violent punishment attack on Mary by republicans, Bernadette had been sent to the GSS Convent in Belfast and had run away from there on one occasion. These events contributed to their father taking them to a Belfast police station, and he is reported to have said he wanted 'nothing more to do with them and it was unsafe for them to return home'. Two days later, a court order confined them to St Mary's, Newry.

The sisters were driven to Newry by two police officers, one of whom was female. What they recall of their arrival there agrees with information from the GSS which suggests that their convents were often used in moments of 'crisis' by the courts, the police or social services. Bernadette recalled that when they arrived a nun told them: 'come with me. We weren't told you're staying here. You're going to school, you're working in a laundry.' In practice this meant that Bernadette went to a local school and worked part-time in the laundry, while Mary was expected to carry out full-time laundry work.

Both Bernadette and Mary included details of the brutalisation that Mary received at the hands of republicans. Mary explained that she escaped the fate of some young women who experienced punishment attacks in that she was not left 'on a lamppost' as a grotesque warning for others to view. Instead, she was thrown out of a car.

“

[I was left] at the side of the road and told that the next army disco I went to my name was on a bullet. But what do you think a teenage Mary did? What do teenagers do? I just went back to the discos again. You know that way there. Anyway, you know what I mean. I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was dancing, you know what I mean.

Mary's account of the drive in the police car from Belfast to Newry conveyed her sense of confusion and distress as life continued to spin out of her control.

“

...it was such a beautiful sunny day, the sun was shining. And we were driving along, and sure you'd love to go for a lovely drive on a lovely day, but we didn't know where we were going. We just didn't know where we were going, what we'd done. You know, okay we went to discos and things like that, but what had we done wrong?

One striking feature of Bernadette's and Mary's testimonies was that they were two teenagers placed in an institution with large numbers of older and, in some cases, elderly women. Mary observed that some 'people had been there for years. There was people, pensioners, 60, 70, [name redacted] must have been about 80.' This was a source of fear for them both. Bernadette was unnerved by an older woman in the bed opposite her who 'used to scare me because she just took her dentures out at night'. More generally, her apprehension stemmed from the sense of the unknown. This was heightened by a lack of

communication with the two teenage girls by those adults who were making decisions to deprive them of their liberty.

“

I was so distressed in Newry. I felt unwanted. I felt worthless. We weren't told how long we were there. When we went in and saw all the old people, we thought we're going to stay there until we were pensioners because nobody said 'you're here for three years' or 'you're here for a year'... Those whole two years nobody spoke about why we were where we were... Like when we went into Newry Convent, we thought we were there until we were pensioners, that we were going to die there like everybody else. Now that is so distressing.

Mary's account of a trip to court during a hearing about their case echoed Bernadette's sense of powerlessness.

“

I remember there, up the stairs and all that, and people were down there, and we were here and looking towards Mummy and Daddy and feeling hatred towards them. Then going into the court, you went into this big, big room, my God, like it was frightening. And all these people all around. Now I don't think, I don't think there was any wigs or anything. I think there was, say the magistrate was there, people all around, and we were sort of here. But they were talking about us, everything about us. Nobody asked us anything, nobody asked are you happy down there or what do you think of whatever, so there was nothing about us.

Mary also reflected on how this passage in her life left her with a sense of abandonment that has remained with her.

“

So, looking back on my life now... first of all I felt abandoned by my parents, abandoned at Hastings Street Police Station... Then the police bringing us and throwing us into that parlour [the nuns' parlour at Newry] with strangers again, abandoned. Who wants you? Nobody wants you. I don't even think those nuns want you. You know, just because they're getting money for you or something, I don't know. I don't know if they got money for us or what. But you know, you'll be, you'll be a good workhorse or whatever.

At the age of 14, Bernadette was one of the youngest children to enter St Mary's, Newry in its history. She was driven to school each morning in one of the three 'red vans' used by the GSS laundry. After school, she returned by bus.



I had to get the bus home, and I was so ashamed, I didn't want anyone to know where I was, because the perception of people back then was you got to be a bad girl if you're put into a convent.

Bernadette pretended that she was not heading towards the convent until the bus was out of sight.

The records suggest that several other women and girls were also sent to St Mary's, Newry due to concerns that had been reported about their alleged behaviour. In these cases, the GSS and those who worked with them to send girls to their laundry shared the GSS' long-standing claim that it was an institution that could 'reform' individuals. An example of this, which also illustrates the movement of women across the border, involved a 17-year-old girl who was sent from the Sisters of Mercy in Dundalk in the 1960s (exact year redacted). In a long letter that appears to be from one of the nuns from the Sisters of Mercy, this girl's history was described. Her family was termed 'respectable, unfortunate', but her father was not included in this complimentary language as he was described as a 'worthless drunk' who 'broke [his wife's] heart and eventually caused her early death'. The girl who was the subject of the approach from the Sister of Mercy to the GSS in Newry had two years earlier apparently 'given such trouble' to her teachers at school (location redacted) that her teachers 'refused to allow her to attend any more classes'. She had gone to a job in Dublin but 'started to stay out till the small hours of the morning without leave'. She had then gone to her sister in England, but her sister 'found it impossible to mind her' and they both ended up back in Dublin where they were found by the Legion of Mary. Having 'consented to behave' she started technical school (location redacted) but 'became [in]subordinate' and was 'hitchhiking rides to Dublin' rather than attending school. It was claimed that when she was 'corrected' about her behaviour she 'assaulted' the teacher and 'pulled her hair'. Her behaviour did not improve and after she hitchhiked to Dublin to see a boyfriend, the Sisters of Mercy brought her to the GSS Convent in Newry. The letter concluded with the hope that 'now that she is away from all her companions she will change and get sense'. She worked in the GSS laundry in Newry for six months before leaving for a job in Dundalk.

SC, who shared her testimony for the QUB and UU report of 2021, was sent to St Mary's, Newry in the early 1970s when she was 15. She had grown up in an institution operated by the Sisters of Nazareth and had run away. She had been spotted drinking alcohol and was sent to Newry.

9.6 Girls and women who were admitted for short-term or crisis accommodation at St Mary's, Newry

The authorities sometimes used St Mary's, Newry as a suitable location for women and girls deemed in need of short-term crisis accommodation or protection. In the 1950s (exact year redacted) when a soldier was imprisoned for abducting a 15-year-old girl, his wife and their child were 'looked after in the Good Shepherd Convent, Newry'.²⁴ In the 1970s (exact year redacted), when a British ex-soldier from the Falls Road in Belfast

received death threats from the Official Irish Republican Army, his wife and children were sheltered there.²⁵ The testimonies from sisters Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross also indicate how the particular circumstances of the Troubles led the authorities to turn to the GSS to provide accommodation for teenage girls.

10.0 What was daily life like in St Mary's, Newry

There are several sources that provide insights into aspects of daily life in the institution. Inspection reports provide some limited evidence from the inspectors who visited St Mary's, Newry. The reports also reveal the issues that were deemed significant to the inspectors and were therefore commented upon and those that they did not comment on and, presumably, they deemed outside their remit.

There is also testimony in various forms. This includes testimony given to the HIAI by women who had been sent to St Mary's, Newry and worked in its laundry as well as testimony about the institution from GSS nuns. Finally, there are testimonies shared for the QUB and UU report of 2021 and with the IP in 2024–25.

10.1 What inspection reports tell us about daily life in St Mary's, Newry

One source of information on everyday life in this institution is the inspection reports written by officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, they were often very short and not particularly revealing. Miss 1, a Ministry of Home Affairs inspector, visited in April 1953 and recorded: 'Material conditions and equipment very good. Girls and women work in laundry, have all amusements laid on inside Home. Quite happy atmosphere in both places.'²⁶

In June 1958, Miss 4 from the Ministry of Home Affairs visited and reported that she was 'shown over the premises by the Rev. Mother'. Miss 4 described 'the girls' recreation room. Domestic kitchen and dining room had been decorated in very pleasant colours and the entire building was in good order.' She also recorded that 'classes in cookery, needlework, reading and simple calculation of money were arranged for the younger residents' and that 'the girls enjoy watching television or films in the evenings. They go for a walk or shopping expeditions in groups.' Miss 4 also observed that the 'majority of the girls were working in the commercial laundry attached to the home and all appeared in good health'. Her report concluded with her opinion that 'this home continues to provide suitably for the women and girls in residence, many of whom are of low intelligence'.²⁷

Another inspection, carried out in 1973, commented on the reduced number of girls and women who were working in the laundry and the arrival of some workers from outside the institution: 'the laundry in the premises now has a fair proportion of lay-employees who come in daily from the outside community'.²⁸ The term 'lay-employees' is an interesting one as it implies that the girls and women of St Mary's, Newry were also considered to be 'employees' even though they had no employment rights and were not receiving

a wage, having National Insurance payments accrue in their names or receiving other statutory employment benefits. The GSS response to controversy over the issue of those who worked without pay in their laundries is to urge consideration of the fact that these girls and women received ‘food, shelter and pastoral support’ from the Sisters. They also maintain that many of these women’s only alternative was homelessness.²⁹

A memorandum written by Miss 1 in 1976 recorded what appears to have been a rearrangement of duties in the laundry following a phase of modernisation. She noted that the Sisters were ‘anxious to show me the new automated equipment in the laundry and dry-cleaning’ and that ‘it still seems possible to find suitable occupation for persons of varying levels of ability and intelligence working with the nuns and the outside lay-staff’.³⁰ It is possible that this modernisation was due to the increased financial involvement of the state in voluntary homes such as the three GSS St Mary’s institutions after the Seebohm Report. This was certainly the view of Sister 1 in her testimony, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

10.2 What the GSS records and testimony tell us about daily life in St Mary’s, Newry

In a written submission prepared by the GSS for the QUB and UU report published in 2021, they detailed the functions of all their institutions in NI. The GSS noted that Marianvale and St Mary’s, Newry ‘shared accommodation’, but that they ‘operated independently and the respective residents would not have interaction with each other’. They reported that the convent grounds hosted a garden and a tennis court. They went on to explain that the ‘period of residency could fluctuate from days/weeks to many years/decades’ and that ‘St Mary’s was primarily a facility for adult women who were vulnerable or otherwise required a place of sanctuary or protection’.³¹ In this respect, their perspective differs markedly with the statistical analysis offered earlier in this chapter that suggests that 38.3% of those sent to St Mary’s, Newry were under 18 years old.

In terms of the daily routine, this statement maintained that the GSS and the girls and women working in the laundry ‘had access to the same dietary provisions’. The communal kitchen was ‘staffed by Sisters (and in later years secular employees). Three meals were served, breakfast, lunch and dinner plus a light supper.’ The GSS went on to maintain the following.

“

[On] busier days in the laundry there was always ‘cocoa and ginger snaps’ afterwards. [And] family and friends would have been provided for too, and special days, like Christmas Day, marked appropriately.

Discussing the laundry itself, the GSS’ statement observed that it ‘served the wider community’, including ‘private homes, B&Bs and hotels’ and used ‘modern machinery’ to carry out this work.

Describing the daily routine, the GSS statement noted that Mass took place at 7.30am daily and that ‘the ladies would have been expected to attend 2–3 times a week but not every day’. Breakfast was at 8.00am and work began at 9.00am. There was mid-morning break and lunch was at 12.30pm. After lunch was ‘recreation time’, during which the women could ‘take a stroll or sit in the garden’. Work began again at 2.00pm and finished at 6.00pm. The statement did not record what time the evening meal was served, but it did describe their leisure time.

“

...the ladies engaged in arts and crafts, singing and music. They often put on great plays which the Sisters recall with great fondness for the fun and laughter generated. There was great camaraderie among the ladies and Sisters alike.

According to the GSS statement, the working week in the laundry was Monday to Friday. On Saturday ‘the ladies...routinely went into Newry in groups to socialise’. Sundays began with Mass and then there was the opportunity to ‘relax in the grounds, with tennis, walks or activities’. The statement also reported that the GSS provided outings to local seaside towns, such as Carlingford and Rostrevor, and in the summer holiday homes were rented ‘so that the ladies could, in rota, get a weeklong holiday’.

In her testimony, Sister 1 recalled her experience of working in the GSS laundries in Derry/Londonderry and Newry. Of Newry, she recalled that there were breaks from the laundry to take occasional visits to ‘a shopping centre somewhere’ with a ‘meal out in a hotel or a restaurant’. She understood that the women had their own money to spend on these occasions.

“

I don’t know how much money they got. They got some money every week anyway. Not a whole lot, I think. It was more pocket money I would say, more or less.

The testimony of Priest 2, who visited the Good Shepherd Convent at Newry on a number of occasions, supported the GSS statement in several respects. He discussed the women in the St Mary’s institution.

“

The girls had a good life. They formed a folk group, there were dances in the hall – they’d a big hall – and there were a number of men who were working in the laundry, you know, as van drivers and delivery men? And they and their families would have come into the dances and...they would have had a good life.

10.3 What the testimony of women, their relatives and others tells us about daily life in St Mary's, Newry

The testimony from OC, whose mother spent seven years working in the GSS laundry at Newry, offered support to elements of the GSS statement. As explained earlier, her mother was sent there by the arrangement of her parish priest, and her father, after she became pregnant by a rape at the age of 14. This was in the 1950s. OC explained her decision to share her testimony.

“

...part of my motivation for coming forward [is that], her experience of the nuns was very different to everybody else's. And, you know, from what I'm hearing and reading, and I've read some of the reports and listened to the news, there's a lot of negative stories coming forward, and no positive stories.

OC's mother continued to visit some of the Good Shepherd nuns after she left the laundry and 'there were two nuns in particular that she was very fond of. One which she worked in the laundry with.' OC explained that she had watched the film *The Magdalene Sisters* and that this made her sceptical about what her mother told her about her relationship with these nuns. Her view was that 'it couldn't have been that good, you know, all these people can't be wrong and you're right?' However, she then accompanied her elderly mother on a visit to one of the nuns.

“

But when I went down and witnessed first-hand the welcome that they gave her, and said: 'Where have you been all these years? We lost contact.' And they were so genuinely delighted. They both cried. And we stayed overnight, and we had a lovely chat.

OC explained that her mother only told her of one negative experience with a Good Shepherd Sister. This was when, pregnant at 14, she arrived at Marianville in Belfast.

“

...she met the Mother Superior, and apparently the first thing that was said to her was 'get down on your knees and pray for forgiveness'. Now mum said, 'forgiveness for what?' She didn't know anything, and she said she still didn't know that she was pregnant until she was brought to Belfast to have the baby.

After giving birth and the adoption of her son, OC's mother was sent to St Mary's, Newry. She made no complaints about her time there even though she described the 'very strict rules and regulations' that she lived under. This included not being allowed to talk while working in the laundry, as OC explained.

“

You know, the nuns had an order of silence, that they couldn't talk. So, they worked alongside one another but there was no conversation during the day. And mum says, yes, you did work hard, but it wasn't really that hard work.

OC's mother told her that she had not experienced any form of abuse at Newry, and OC described how strongly her mother felt about this.

“

And she said never ever, ever, did she hear anybody complain about abuse or say they were abused, or did she witness anything. And, to the degree where she used to get really cross. I can remember watching *The Magdalene Sisters* on the television when it came out, and she went ballistic and wanted me to turn it off, and said 'none of that happened, that's a disgrace'. And she was very adamant about it. And to this, to the day she died, she still wouldn't watch any of those kind of programmes, because she said that wasn't her experience.

Until 1965, when the Second Vatican Council completed its work, the GSS were a cloistered Order. This would have been a factor in the silent working conditions that OC's mother recalled. It also meant that the GSS could not leave their convent without express permission to do so. This led to a particular role being given to OC's mother.

“

[Because] the nuns weren't allowed to leave the unit, mum was chosen, as being a good girl who always did what she was told, and she used to bring the babies [from Marianvale] – on a bicycle – to the train station and bring them to a children's home...as far as I understand.

OC understands that her mother's regular routine was early morning Mass followed by a day's work in the laundry. She recalled deliveries of dirty bedding from hotels 'with lorry loads of sheets and stuff'. One of the nuns taught her 'how to fold a sheet properly'. OC recalled even late in her life her mother telling her: 'You're not ironing that sheet correctly.' She described how her mother was 'very proud of her work' and that the laundry had to be done right, 'had to be starched and she was very proud of it'. When asked if her mother was paid for her work in the laundry she replied that 'I think it was a small allowance, but she would never have got out to spend the allowance'. This is the only reference to any form of cash payment being made to a girl or woman working in one of the GSS laundries in NI before the late 1960s or early 1970s.

OC's testimony is significant as it provides an example that supports the GSS' claim that their St Mary's institutions might provide a sanctuary for a vulnerable girl or woman. In this instance, a traumatised 14-year-old child – a victim of rape whose baby had been taken from her and whose father refused to allow her return to the family home – found a degree of comfort and safety in the institution.

The remaining testimonies on St Mary's, Newry do not offer a great deal of support for the GSS perspectives on life in the institution, although Bernadette Ross, who was there for one year in the early 1970s, did have one memory that did align with these. She remembered one of the musical events that was organised, although she recalled it being a one-off rather than a weekly event.



And I have to say this, the nuns put on a one-off concert in the big hall where we always sat every night. And I got up and said a poem. And then afterwards everybody mingled. So, I made a friend in the front row.

As Priest 2 had recalled, members of the local community, possibly the families of the laundry van drivers, attended this musical event and it was one of them, a teenage boy of her own age, that Bernadette welcomed the opportunity to chat with that evening. She explained that mixing with 'peers my own age' to talk about music and fashion was 'what I missed'. She used the 'pocket money' she was given, which she thinks was £1 or £2 per week, for trips to Newry on Saturday, where she sometimes met schoolmates. However, she reflected sadly on her return to the convent: 'I had nobody. I went back to a home full of pensioners.'

At 14, Bernadette was the youngest person working in the laundry in 1972. She attended a grammar school in Newry during term time. Once back inside the convent, Bernadette was sometimes called upon to work in the laundry. She recalled these occasions.



I couldn't do my homework, I had to go straight down the laundry, because they were behind. And you'd be there 'til supper time.

Bernadette wrote to her social worker to complain about this.



I wrote him a letter which is over 52 years old, saying to him about I couldn't do my homework again you know because I had to go straight down to the laundry. You know so it's not something I'm making up. There are quite a few letters to the social worker.

Bernadette explained that 'my school holidays were spent in the laundry working, Easter holidays, Christmas whatever, whenever the laundry was open, I was there'. She remembered that her first experience of work came the morning after her arrival in the institution. She was put to work on shirts.

“

...one of the women would starch the collars and cuffs and give it to me. And then I would put it on you know like a mannequin, and you push the foot pedal, and the hot air comes out and takes the wrinkles out. And it was making me sick, so I got into the packaging room, so you know all the clothes come [in] brown paper, you parcelled it up and stuck it in that, so it had to be done in a certain way, and it had to be done neat.

When Bernadette tried to talk to the others around her, the reply was ‘shh shh shh’ and then a nun approached and told her ‘you do not speak when you’re working’. This memory suggests that even after the Second Vatican Council the GSS continued to maintain traditional disciplinary and working practices in its laundries.

Bernadette’s sister, Mary Nolan, was 15 when she arrived and worked full-time in the laundry. She described her first experience of this.

“

I was brought to the Calender. It’s a big Calender where sheets and pillowcases [were fed through]. So, when I was brought, I was on the left-hand side, and I was with this wee, this wee lady. A woman who looked 70. She showed me what to do for these sheets to go through the Calender, you know, to go through in the pillowcases...I must have been doing so well, I couldn’t tell you if it was a few weeks, a few months, but I was upscaled to the pressers.

Mary recalls dirty laundry arriving from Banbridge, Hillsborough, Rostrevor and Armagh. She knew this because ‘I seen the addresses and things like that, because I helped Sister H with the bookkeeping’. Among the items being cleaned that she particularly remembers were priests’ vestments. Police officers’ shirts arrived from a local police station for laundering. Overall, the volume of work was high.

“

...the laundry was always busy, always very, very busy. You know there was not a time when there wasn’t anything in the laundry. From those times there was always something to do.

Mary and Bernadette did not complain about the physical effect of the work on themselves. However, they were concerned about its impact on some of the much older women who were working in the laundry. Bernadette observed them and summarised her impressions.

“

...those people shouldn't have been in that laundry. They should've been sitting down in a comfortable chair watching TV, taking it easy. But they were in that laundry...I tried to remember right back, tried to remember, was there no comfortable chairs in that laundry, not in that laundry, in that place? Then I remembered there was. It was in the nun's parlour. They had like Chesterfield suites, and the comfortable chairs, where the TV was and the radio was. It just came back to me within a lot of weeks ago. That's where the comfortable chairs were. [But the older women in the laundry] they were on their feet continually.

Bernadette was also concerned about one woman who had terminal cancer. She was not expected to work but this woman spent her days 'just left sitting in the chair with...shawls around her to keep her warm. She didn't get that special attention that she needed at the end of her life.'

SC was sent to St Mary's, Newry twice, once after she had run away, aged 15, from an institution operated by the Sisters of Nazareth and again, aged 17, after the birth and adoption of her son. On the second occasion, she was transferred from Marianvale to St Mary's, Newry. Her testimony includes reference to the 'pocket money' that appears to have been paid from around 1973.

“

...they didn't give us any pay or nothing. I think they were actually getting paid for us to be there, but they weren't giving us like a wage as such. It would probably be about £2 a week if that. We'd be out once a week and that, we would have to pay for our own toiletries out of that. And we were working from about eight o'clock in the morning. I'm sure it was until about four or half-four in the afternoon roughly. And it was just a sweatshop.

SC raised a point that has also been discussed by others in relation to those that worked without pay in the GSS laundries. This is about how entitlement to a state pension will be impacted by the fact that they worked without National Insurance contributions being paid. SC queried this.

“

What about our National Insurance stamp? I'm not aware of that because we didn't receive money. So, what happens when I'm pension age? Have I got enough stamps to cover me? I don't know.

20250404BL – who gave testimony explaining her birth mother's three-year stay in Marianvale and then St Mary's, Newry in the early 1970s – explained what her mother was told.

“

She was told that she had to pay off her debt. She said she was told she had to work to pay all her debt off for having me and looking after her at the time and feeding her. No, she didn't get any money, definitely not. She told me that it was very strict as in there was a regimented routine. Basically, you got up at a certain time early, you know, you had your jobs to do, you had to pray, things like that. She says, 'I'll never forget we were marched down the front of the chapel and you were sat, you know, and you had to pray.' Not a lot, she wouldn't talk a lot about it, she said there was one nice nun and she says that was it, the rest, no. She said the rest were not nice at all. She said you weren't allowed, she'd remember some girls and you weren't allowed to talk much, she said but she doesn't tell me a lot, to be honest...

The GSS statement suggested that the laundry was closed on Saturday, and it was a day of rest. However, Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross both discussed the extensive cleaning that had to be completed on Saturday. Mary provided detailed explanation of how each of the rooms were cleaned meticulously. Here is one example.

“

If you were in charge of the dormitory, on a Saturday you pulled everybody's beds out, you pulled their lockers out, you washed round the walls, any marks round the skirting boards, round the window ledges. You lifted, you know, you did one bed at a time, washed round everywhere like that. Then their wee lockers, you were able to lift the stuff up and put on the bed. I'm not too sure if I polished the lockers, not too sure, but you cleaned the top of the lockers and all that, put their stuff back on again, put their locker back, put the bed back. Sorry I should have mentioned, while you had the beds moved, you brushed the floor. When you brushed the floor, you washed the floor, and that gave that time to dry. Then you got down on your knees, nothing to support your knees, there wasn't a pad or a cushion. You had a big tin of wax; you had a big tin of wax. So, you got the wax, and you had the cloths...where you had to shine it that much that it shone, it was shining like glass.

Bernadette recalled the segregation that existed at Mass. She knew that the occupants of Marianvale were behind her during the service, but she was 'not allowed to turn round' to look at them. Bernadette and Mary also both discussed the desire they had to escape from the laundry. Mary recalled her feelings at those times.

“

I really wasn't really settled. So, I was crying, I was trying to escape. I was trying to open doors. Every time I tried to open a door there was a nun behind me. So, then I stopped...you know you're looking for somewhere to escape. And then every time you look behind there was a nun, not saying nothing, just standing there like a prison warden.

Bernadette provided details on an attempt to run away that was thwarted when another woman alerted the nuns.

“

[This woman] would do the dinners and she's always up in the nuns' house, she kept an eye on who went in and out, when my sister and I went to run away she seen us through the kitchen window, so they were straight on us, the nuns who brought us back.

This woman may have been one of a small group of women that Mary called 'the trusted ones'. They were otherwise known as trustees, or auxiliaries (as explained in the chapter on the Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries). Mary explained this role was held by the oldest person in the junior group, which was made up of the teenagers and women in their twenties.

“

[The oldest in the Junior group] had been brought up in Nazareth Lodge in [redacted] and she'd been living in convents all her life, she told us her story. She was one of the trusted ones 'cause she'd been, she was there, she worked in the dry cleaners. So, she was one of the trusted ones.

The 'trusted ones' wore navy overalls that differentiated them from the others in the laundry.

In terms of their treatment by the nuns, Bernadette remembered Sister H with some affection because she gave her chocolate secretly. However, she described the overall atmosphere as cold: 'there's no arm around the shoulder when you're upset'. She recalled no instances of physical abuse, saying 'I wasn't beat. I didn't see anybody being beat. It was all psychological.' Bernadette suggested that the threat of being sent to Middletown (Training School), which they were told 'was like prison', was used by the nuns if they deemed someone was misbehaving.

However, Bernadette did narrate the details of a very disturbing encounter with an educational psychologist, who was not employed at St Mary's, Newry, who assessed her educational attainment level so that a decision could be made around a school placement.

“

...he started asking me personal questions which I thought was wrong. He had me in tears; he told me I had to answer it. He asked me did I wear a bra, did I have hair under my arms, did I have pubic hair, did I have my period? And thinking back now I see him as a predator, because he was determining what type of school I went to, what did my development have to do with it? Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Mary shared Bernadette's view that the environment in the institution was cold. She reflected on the fact that during her time in the laundry the term used to address the nuns changed from Mother to Sister (so Mother X became Sister X): 'they changed to Sister, but there was nothing motherly about them'. She illustrated this with one memory that was very significant to her.

“

...what I do remember clearly in my memory was my [sixteenth] birthday. Nobody wished me happy birthday. So, if the nuns have your date of birth down and all that, you know...I wasn't mentioned or anything. It was just an ordinary day in the laundry, did my own thing.

Her birthday was only recognised when Mary's social worker arrived with a box of chocolates, which she opened and shared among the other girls and women in what she described as 'a really great feast'.

Mary's testimony also included a further example that she believes suggested a lack of attention to her needs. For some time after their arrival Bernadette and Mary had 'only the clothes on our back', what they had worn when their father had taken them to the police station. Mary remembered as follows.

“

I only had the one bra, you know, and I had one pair of knickers. So, they must have give us, I think they gave us soap and a facecloth, toothbrush and toothpaste and maybe a towel...every night when I was in cleaning my teeth and you know getting my night dress on, I washed my knickers, I washed the one pair of knickers. And I squeezed them out tight with the towel and things and I brought them in, and I put them towards my right thigh and lay on them all night, so they were dry for the morning. So that means in the morning then, you had a clean pair of knickers then for the morning. You know, I forget how long that went on for.

Sometime later, the GSS did supply her with some clothing, but Mary described it as not suitable for a 15-year-old.

“

...they brought this kind of pink checked suit that, now as a teenager I looked at it because it would put you in mind of somebody at 70 would wear it. I had to wear it. It was like pink brown checked, pink, brown tweed. And like then in the '70s your, your, your skirts and your clothes were a couple of inches above your knee. This would have come down mid, mid on me, right you know, straight down. And I had to wear like those hats that they wore then, I think Christian women wear them now... And I had to wear that to Mass.

Bernadette and Mary's mother eventually sent some clothes to them along with a doll for each of them. Mary acknowledged this was an unusual gift for teenage girls and speculated that this was meant as 'a form of comfort or something'. Her mother also brought her a small transistor radio, which Mary listened to on her own at nighttime because, she said, 'what else was there to do?' The dormitories were unlocked after dinner so Mary 'used to just go on up to bed'. She recalled that they were locked for the rest of the day. This meant that even if someone was feeling sick, such as when Mary had severe period pains, 'nobody got back to bed. That's it.' There were four dormitories, and they were supervised at night by a nun who slept in a room nearby.

None of the testimonies included any significant comments about food. SC described their breakfast.

“

...it was McCann's bread, but it wasn't sliced, it was just all one big thing, and she put it through, and she sliced it, and you got the big plate, and then you brought it down. You brought the milk down from the Convent, I can't remember what else, the cereals, you'd already got them out, they were down in the dining room in a cupboard. So, you put those down there and lift the bowls out, so everybody came, got their cereal, you put their toast in the middle of their tables. I think you brought the tea down; you brought a big pot of tea down. And that was it and everybody had their breakfast.

Mary's and Bernadette's testimonies both highlighted the sound of the bell that rang to indicate the start of various daily routines in the institution. They both linked its regularity to the conformity and institutionalisation that they observed there.

“

I forget who taught me the rules and the way you were supposed to behave. I forget who taught me, but I followed, everybody followed the regime. Old, and young, disabled and whatever. And I've said about the bell, that bell would just, it was it. **[Bernadette]**

“

Everybody adjusts, it's just like *Tenko*, you know *Tenko*? When I saw that years later and like everybody, you know, routine, regime, you get used, you know. Like wee, wee sheep, you know, going into the laundry or ding, ding, ding, ding, going into the dining room, ding, ding, ding.³² **[Mary]**

SC also commented on what she perceived to be the institutionalisation of the older women who had been there for some time.

“

Well, I was panicking, you know, like not screaming or anything, but I was saying ‘I’m not staying here until I’m their age’ and you know. But I didn’t know the full story then. How they came to go there. And probably what had happened, a lot of these women who had parents shunned them out: ‘you don’t come back home’. They had their babies, and they were just put down there and that was it. So, then it was a way of life for them. They just got institutionalised, used to it. I was already institutionalised with my upbringing and then for it to happen again, you know...

For SC, this was exacerbated by the fact that the convent was ‘in the middle of nowhere. They picked a good place to hide it, put it that way, you know what I mean.’ The laundry, she recalled, ‘was right at the back, at the end’.

Testimony was shared by JP, who was a paid employee in the GSS laundry at Newry at one point during the 1970s. She was one of the ‘lay-employees’ who were noted by the inspector in 1976. Sister 1 also recalled the greater availability of grants from the state in the 1970s that funded the employment of staff who came into the laundries each day from outside the three GSS convents. JP described the girls and women from the St Mary’s institution who worked in the laundry. She recalled that they were paid ‘something very little’ and thought it might have been a sum of £2 per week. This would tally with the use of the term ‘pocket money’ by Sister 1 in describing what payments were paid to the majority of the GSS’ laundry workforce in the 1970s and 1980s. While this represented an improvement on matters prior to that, it raises a question about how employees from outside the convent were paid a full wage while the St Mary’s girls and women remained largely uncompensated apart from ‘pocket money’.

JP travelled each day from her home to the GSS laundry. Initially, she was employed in the washroom. She also recalled working on the presser. Among the items she cleaned were priests’ vestments and laundry from local hotels. JP explained that there was a ‘head lady’ in charge of the laundry who was also a paid employee who lived outside the convent. However, the majority of the workforce were ‘girls there who were in it, who were not married and having children and little girls that were kind of, what you say, slow with learning disabilities and older, older people’.

At one point, JP worked alongside a young woman from Rol who had recently had a baby ‘a week or two before’. JP reported that this woman’s stay was a short one. JP also recalled working with another young woman who had been moved to the laundry from a children’s institution. She also remembered one of the older women who was given the nickname Annie Oakley because she ‘was a wee bit disabled, she used to run round with a gun [an imaginary one] shooting you’. Another woman JP recalled was ‘a bit disabled, you know, she’s out in the community now, not far from where I live’.

JP described the separate entrances into the laundry for the workers who came from outside and the women living in St Mary’s, Newry. The latter ‘when they were coming in, they were coming in like that herded together, and you could see their face you know’. The paid workers were only told the first names of these girls and women. JP explained that the nuns ‘did not want you to interact with or to bother with the girls...you weren’t really allowed to talk’. However, JP did have conversations with them.

One woman told JP that the nuns ‘weren’t bad to her’. However, JP’s impression of the environment was less positive.

“

[It was] very cold, very, you know what I mean, they didn’t...just do the work and out, they were very cold, it was a very cold environment you know...I was not used to treating people with coldness and it was like an army, you know, military.

This negative verdict is shared by a woman who JP encounters occasionally. This woman, who now lives independently, was placed in the institution at a very young age. JP explained that ‘she meets me in [location redacted] and she’d say to me “that was a bad place”’.

10.4 What the HIAI report tells us about St Mary’s, Newry

The HIAI report provides some further testimony about life in St Mary’s, Newry with three individuals describing their experiences in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. One testimony referred to the practice of silence at meal times, which was ‘relieved only by a nun reading from a book or newspaper’.³³ The GSS accepted that silence during meals was something that was carried over from the Sisters’ own practice at meal times. One of the Sisters, in her evidence to the HIAI, said ‘she tried to lighten the atmosphere by reading from a humorous book or from a newspaper’. She also said that sometimes the Sister in Charge did allow conversations at mealtimes but that the practice of silence continued until at least the late 1960s.³⁴

The HIAI report also referred to the practice of changing names, which was a feature in all three of the St Mary’s institutions and one which the HIAI considered ‘caused considerable distress and confusion to those affected’.³⁵ The GSS ‘reiterated that this was to protect the privacy of the girls so that no one could pry into their backgrounds’.³⁶ The Newry registers show that this practice did continue in the 1970s but with some changes by that decade. In the 1940s and 1950s, the majority of those who were admitted were given a ‘House Name’ that was very different to their first name. By the 1960s, the percentage of those who were given names very different to their own had dropped to 45%, and by the 1970s, 9% of women and girls were given a name that was very different from their own. By the 1970s, the changed names were more common female names such as ‘Bridget, Veronica, Helena and Ann’ rather than more unusual saints’ names. Mary Nolan described how her name was changed on arrival in 1972. It was an example of how the changes were less radical by this period, as she became known as ‘Mary Pat’. In her case, she was told there were already other women called Mary in the institution.

HIA359 (sent to Newry from Good Shepherd Limerick as a teenager in the mid-1950s) remembered being hit across the knuckles with an object during lessons. She also recalled being locked in a dark room, being slapped for ‘giggling’ and being beaten with a cane during her time in St Mary’s, Newry.³⁷

Recollections of hard work were common in evidence given to the HIAI. All the witnesses who had spent time in St Mary's, Newry recall working in its laundry. HIA387 and HIA377 told the inquiry that work in the laundry was 'hot, physically demanding and tiring'.³⁸ Witness HIA359 described working in the laundry from 9:00am until 7:00pm. She also recalled sewing priests' vestments and being directed to pick potatoes on farmland adjacent to the convent.³⁹ None of the HIAI witnesses recalled receiving a wage for the work that they did. Witness HIA202 was sent to St Mary's, Newry, aged 15, in the early 1970s and was later relocated to St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. She was sent there after running away from Newry. She also recalled that she received 'pocket money' for working in the laundry. She told the HIAI that 'I felt like I was brainwashed in the Good Shepherd. There was a regimented routine and I had to follow it. It was like being in the army except with constant religion forced on you.'⁴⁰

The HIAI report noted that 'particularly in later years' there was a television, music lessons were available and teenage girls in the home were 'encouraged to learn what were seen as useful skills such as embroidery and dress making'.⁴¹ The television appears to have arrived for a particular occasion, as one of the GSS who had worked in St Mary's, Newry in 1956 explained that they 'purchased a television so that the Sisters, ladies and teenagers could all watch the marriage of the Hollywood actress Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier of Monaco'.⁴²

The GSS told the HIAI that literacy classes were offered in St Mary's, Newry, alongside other subjects.



...cooking and baking classes, craft classes including knitting, crochet, cane work... to ensure that the teenagers acquired the necessary domestic and life skills to ensure they would be independent and self-sufficient when they left.⁴³

The HIAI noted the addition of short holidays to local destinations, such as Carlingford and Rostrevor, in the summer when holiday homes were rented 'so that the ladies could, in rota, get a weeklong holiday'.⁴⁴ This appears to have commenced in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

11.0 Where girls and women went when they left St Mary's, Newry

The brief information recorded in the St Mary's, Newry admissions register does allow for some understanding of how girls and women left the institution and where they went next. However, the details offered are limited and rather vague.

11.1 Girls and women whose destination when leaving St Mary's, Newry is unknown

For 70 (15.6%) women and girls, there was nothing written about where they went after they left. For others what was written is unclear: for example, in 17 cases the notes recorded a location with no more information, such as 'went to Belfast' or 'went to Dublin'.

It was recorded that a woman who was admitted when she was aged 23 in the 1960s (exact year redacted) 'went to California' four years later, but there is no explanation about how or why this happened. Two women were recorded as 'went away herself', which presumably means that they took an independent decision to leave and that their departure was not managed by the GSS or any other state or religious organisation.

A woman who remained in the institution for one year, in the 1950s (exact year redacted), had 'sub normal, returned to Dublin' as the only details placed in the register about her. In the cases of 12 women, the name of a hospital was given as their destination, but it is unclear if they were being admitted as a patient or if they had gone to work there.

11.2 Girls and women who returned to family or friends when leaving St Mary's, Newry

Of the 385 women and girls for whom a destination was recorded, 136 (35.3%) went to live with family. One person in this group was a 16-year-old girl who arrived in the 1950s (exact year redacted) from Marianvale and after she had worked in the laundry for six years was recorded as having 'returned to relatives'. A 50-year-old woman who was admitted in the 1960s (exact year redacted), after she was 'sent' to work in the laundry by a priest, stayed in the institution for six months before leaving for her sister's home. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a woman who had been in St Mary's, Newry for seven months left 'to go to her sister in USA'.

20250404BL gave testimony explaining that her birth mother, who was from Rol, was raped in the early 1970s. She became pregnant, and her parish priest drove her and her mother to Marianvale from which she was transferred to the laundry for three years. When there was a change of parish priest, 20250404BL's aunt took the opportunity to ask the new priest about the whereabouts of her sister. Her aunt has explained her attempts to 20250404BL.



She wrote a letter to Marianvale, my auntie, but she had previously wrote letters and got no reply...so eventually this last letter she wrote she said she was coming down for a day to take her sister out for the day, and she arrived down and called at Marianvale, took her out and my mother said they never went back.

Her aunt has told 20240404BL that 'I would have done it sooner only I didn't know where she was and I didn't know how to get there'. This is a further example from the three St Mary's institutions of a woman who was admitted to one of them requiring the active intervention of a relative before she felt she could leave the institution. However, as was also noted above, the St Mary's, Newry records did note two women who appear to have left on their own initiative.

11.3 Girls and women who left St Mary's, Newry to take up employment

The statement provided in 2018 by the GSS about its St Mary's institutions argued that 'where they could, the Sisters encouraged the women to improve their circumstances and return to life in society'. Furthermore, the statement claimed that those with academic ability were 'encouraged to attend college or to pursue training contracts'. They pointed to the example of Daisy Hill Hospital as an employer 'where women obtained placements and ultimately work'.⁴⁵

Testimonies collected providing details of the lived experience of working in the laundry at Newry also offer examples of the circumstances in which an individual might or might not leave the institution. OC's mother was one of those women for whom the GSS secured employment. As explained above, OC is the daughter of a woman placed in St Mary's, Newry as a teenager in the 1950s. OC's mother was raped at the age of 14 and after giving birth to a son was placed in St Mary's, Newry where she worked in the laundry for seven years. Her father had spurned her pleas to be allowed to return to the family home and only relented on his deathbed. At that point the GSS appear to have assisted in finding her employment.



She had wrote and wrote and wrote to her father and asked him could she come home, and he said he didn't have any money to take her home – and why would she be coming home. And finally, then, he was on his deathbed, and she wrote and asked him could she come and look after him. And that's when he reneged...my mum left the convent, went to work for a doctor's family...and she was, like, you know, their sort of au pair come housekeeper, I believe arranged by the nuns.

Fifty-two (13.5%) women and girls are recorded as leaving to take up employment outside the institution. Details are often sparse in these instances. For example, a 20-year-old who was admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) left a year later 'to employment in Dungannon'. A 23-year-old who was also admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) and stayed for four years had her departure marked only with the words 'went to employment'. In the 1960s (exact year redacted), a 30-year-old woman left the institution when 'welfare secured employment' for her. She had been in St Mary's, Newry for two years. This was one example when statutory authorities were involved in arranging a departure from St Mary's, Newry, and there were numerous others. As was explained earlier of 20250304FQ's birth mother, her mother left St Mary's, Newry to take up a job in a city across the border. In her case, she returned sometime later to give birth to 20250304FQ in Marianvale and she was instructed to remain there 'until the final adoption arrangements are made'.

11.4 Girls and women who left St Mary's, Newry following the intervention of statutory authorities

In numerous other cases, the statutory authorities also arranged a girl or woman's departure. In one example from the 1970s (exact year redacted), a 36-year-old woman

was 'returned home at the request of Welfare' after nine years in St Mary's, Newry. In cases referring to 'welfare', the GSS were indicating that the girl or woman's county welfare committee was taking action. In only one case were the police referenced. This was in the 1940s (exact year redacted), when a 32-year-old woman, described by the nuns as 'mentally deficient and troublesome', was removed by the police to a destination that was not recorded.

On New Year's Eve 1965, a court sent one woman to St Mary's, Newry but when she returned to court 12 days later, she 'was not sent back'. A 14-year-old girl was described as 'very disturbed and unsuitable for here' and went to St Joseph's Training School in Middletown, Co Armagh after a couple of weeks at St Mary's in the 1970s (exact year redacted).⁴⁶ Mary Nolan's testimony indicated that girls in the institution felt that Middletown was used as a threat to those who did not conform to the GSS' expectations about their behaviour, in particular if they tried to run away. She was told the following.



[If you] walked out that gate, you end up in Middletown. That's always put in our head. Middletown had all the bars; it was like prison. So, if you walk out, you'll go to Middletown. Everybody was so frightened of Middletown.

11.5 Girls and women who were transferred to another GSS institution from St Mary's, Newry

The GSS network featured prominently in the destinations for women and girls who left St Mary's, Newry. Fifty-four (14.0%) were recorded as going to other GSS institutions: 29 to St Mary's, Belfast; 11 to Derry/Londonderry; and a total of 14 to either Cork, Limerick, Waterford or New Ross. A woman who had come from the Good Shepherd Convent in Waterford in the 1940s (exact year redacted) remained just over one year in St Mary's, Newry before being 'sent to Good Shepherd Home, Belfast'. A 23-year-old woman admitted in the 1950s (exact year redacted) left four months later and had only the words 'Good Shepherd Limerick' recorded as a note on her departure.

In the cases of teenage sisters Mary Nolan and Bernadette Ross, they left after one year. Bernadette recalled that 'although we were to stay there 'til we were 18, Mummy wanted to bring us home. Daddy was working in England, and we went home.' She recalled that Mary had written to the social worker to say: 'once she turned 16...she said she was out of there, she was not staying there anymore'. However, Mary was one of those who was transferred between GSS institutions, as she spent one month in St Mary's, Belfast. She then was relocated to a hostel and then secured employment. Bernadette also returned to Belfast and enrolled in a new school for her final year of secondary education. Five others were recorded as leaving to go to school or college; these included a woman who arrived in the 1970s (exact year redacted), aged 16, and left having spent two years in St Mary's, Newry to go to catering college in Belfast.

11.6 Girls and women who were transferred to another religious institution from St Mary's, Newry

The wider network of Catholic religious orders featured regularly as a destination to which girls and women were transferred when they left the GSS in Newry. Forty women (10.3%) went to other religious institutions. At least nine went to religious institutions in RoI, and included a 17-year-old girl, who was sent to St Mary's, Newry in the 1960s (exact year redacted) by a Co Tyrone priest. Two years later she was transferred to the Sisters of Charity in Donnybrook, which was also a Magdalene laundry.⁴⁷ Another woman came from the Good Shepherd School in Limerick in the 1950s (exact year redacted) and stayed in St Mary's, Newry for three years before being 'sent to High Park Convent Drumcondra'. High Park was operated by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, also with a laundry attached. The institution featured prominently in the growing controversy about Magdalene laundries in RoI when it was revealed that not all women who had died there appeared to have had their deaths registered: a fact that only emerged when their graves were exhumed when the Order sold off the site to property developers.⁴⁸

11.7 Girls and women who ran away from St Mary's, Newry

While the register only recorded two individuals as running away, several testimonies suggest that other girls and women ran away and were then returned to St Mary's, Newry. In SC's testimony, she revealed that both times she was sent to St Mary's, Newry she ran away. The first time she was 15 and the second time she was 17. She narrated details of her second departure from the convent, describing how she and two other young women scampered over the fields.

“

And we had to run across these fields. So, there was a couple of women out, you know what I mean...and I'm praying 'don't tell any of the nuns that, you know, you've seen us'. They probably realised 'oh look they're running away'. I don't know, or [they] probably just ignored us.

The trio then hitched a lift to Belfast where they took a ferry to Liverpool. SC explained that they could afford this because '[name redacted] had some savings, so she paid for our tickets and that, you know what I mean'. Asked why she chose to run away, SC's reply was straightforward: 'Because I didn't want to be there anymore, you know.'

Several witnesses to the HIAI discussed instances of girls and women running away from the St Mary's institutions. In 1967, D absconded a total of four times from Newry.⁴⁹ P ran away to Limerick, in 1973, with another girl from the laundry. Witness HIA202 ran away from St Mary's, Newry to Liverpool with two other girls and was brought back by the police.⁵⁰ In this case it is not recorded under what legal authority the police returned them to the GSS, but as HIA202's childhood was spent in a children's home it is likely that she was the subject of an order made by the court.

11.8 What the GSS testimony tells us about women who stayed in St Mary's, Newry for extended periods of time

The GSS statement of 2018 about their St Mary's institutions argued that some women had 'extremely complex vulnerabilities' and remained 'with the Sisters for the rest of their lives'. This was a viewpoint that was repeated in the testimony of Sister 2.

“

I mean here you had all these women for one reason or another...a lot of them were very vulnerable people. A lot of them would have...again not been capable of independent living on their own. And, therefore, it was a place of protection, safety but there was a great atmosphere among them, you know, there was...I mean looking back on it today now, it wouldn't obviously be accepted but at the time...and, you know like, everybody knew that women were there. Everybody knew that it was part of the story, 'welfare people' were there...I suppose we were saying that these women...they have a home, they're being fed.

Sister 2's testimony suggested factors through which the GSS identified a young woman who, in their view, would benefit from spending time in one of their St Mary's institutions.

“

I suppose, we would have had some mothers who would have come from institutions, that was a totally different scenario all together. I mean they had no family support, they had been maybe out working then here they were landed with a child and so...so very often that child would have been sent to a nursery, do you know? And very often...if we felt that this young person was going to be back here in Marianville again in another year or two we would maybe recommend to her that she might go to one of our own houses in...into St Mary's, the adult place, for her own protection. And some of them did and then they left, they might have stayed there a year or two and then went out, others maybe stayed all their lives, because they...they would've obviously have had maybe, what's the word I would use? They weren't capable of independent living. And, they wouldn't have the ability to make choices, kind of thing, you know?

After they had spent a year or two in the institution, Sister 2 explained that 'if they were able, Sisters would have got positions for them and that happened'. Sister 2 believed that in the cases of some girls who were raised in an institution and 'who never had family. They were lost, you know?' She argued the value of the GSS in these cases.

“

...that's where we kind of saw Good Shepherd ministry in a very special way I think. To support them and make life as best we could for them and their future, you know?

Recalling her limited experience of working in St Mary's, Belfast, Sister 2 described the process if any of the girls or women wanted to leave the convent.

“

...they would talk to the Sister in Charge...if they insisted and wanted it, and she'd get a job for them if they had nowhere to go as most of them wouldn't have had family you know? But she would get a job for them then, maybe a live-in job or many of them went to work in the hospitals, you know.

Any such conversations must have applied to those who were working there without any Place of Safety Order or Probation Order that confined them to the laundry. Sister 1 offered a similar answer to a question on this topic.

“

Oh, we'd send her to the Mistress. She'd have to talk...not to me, you know. She'd have to discuss that with the Sister in Charge. And she'd be...she'd have to...to go up to her office and talk to her about that. And the Sister in Charge would have a chat with her and would decide whether she could go straight away or...you know that she'd have to find employment or what she wanted...if she was referred by the social worker you'd have to talk first then to a social worker and discuss it. And if she had family, you'd have to talk to family about it. But very often they were kind of independent and they...had no family support.

Priest 2 also offered his view on the girls and women there and on why some of them did not leave.

“

...some had personality difficulties and they weren't able to look after themselves...none of them seemed to stay a short time. They all stayed quite a while and a number of them died there.

Asked if he felt that anything could have been done differently in terms of how these women were treated, Priest 2 gave his observations.

“

I honestly think they should have tried harder to allow them to live in the community. I mean a number of them have done that and have done very well. Done very well. [Two names redacted, including one woman who went on to buy her own home], they have, I think they should have needed more encouragement.

11.9 Where women went when St Mary's, Newry closed

The records of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry reveal that seven women were transferred there when the convent in Newry closed in 1984. This included one woman who had been sent to the GSS in Newry by a priest when she was 21 years old, in the 1940s (exact year redacted). The records indicate that she was still living in St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry in (exact year redacted), by which point she had spent 44 years in these two GSS institutions.

Another woman who was born in 1932 but with no recorded admission date was transferred from St Mary's, Newry to Beechway Residential Home in 1994 when St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry closed. Another woman who also appears to have been transferred from Newry to Derry/Londonderry and then to Beechway in 1994 had a recorded date of birth of 1916. However, the oldest woman to be transferred in this way by the GSS was born in 1901 and had entered St Mary's, Newry when she was 66, in 1967. She was 83 when she moved to Derry/Londonderry. Her records show that she died in 1992 and was buried in the GSS plot for the former 'residents' of St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry, which is in Ardmore Cemetery just outside the city.

After the closure of the GSS Convent at Newry, at least one woman appears to have secured sheltered accommodation away from those women who moved to Derry/Londonderry. This might have been the case because she was younger than the others. She was interviewed about her life by a local newspaper in 2010. She revealed that the happiest day of her life involved coming 'back to the outside after 9 years (from when I was 16 until I was 25) being placed in the Good Shepherd Convent in Newry where I worked in the laundry'. Asked what made her angry in life, she replied, being 'away for so long in the convent without getting home for even a day'.⁵¹ The article did not record any further details on the reasons that led to her time in St Mary's, Newry.

12.0 Deaths and burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Newry

The admissions register for St Mary's, Newry provides the details of ten women who died (between the years 1951 and 1985) either while they were in St Mary's or after they had left the institution. According to their civil death certificates, at least five of the ten women died with their place of death described as either St Mary's Convent or the Mercy Home (which was a nursing home in Newry that was operated by the Sisters of Mercy). These five deaths occurred in the years 1954, 1956, 1973, 1978 and 1980.

The woman who died in 1973 was aged 51 and died from breast cancer. She had been first admitted to St Mary's in 1954 aged 32. Later, she had 'returned to relatives' but was readmitted in 1957 before again leaving at Christmas 1962. She was readmitted again in 1964. According to the St Mary's admissions register, she was buried in Ardmore Cemetery where women from St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry were usually interred. However, her name does not feature on the list of 49 burials at Ardmore provided by the GSS.⁵² Additionally, gravestone inscriptions have been transcribed online for both Ardmore Old and New cemeteries, but neither record any form of memorial for this woman.⁵³

The woman who died in 1978 had been sent from Newry Union Workhouse when it closed in 1948. Her cause of death was recorded on her civil death registration as being from heart-related issues. Her date of birth is recorded on the St Mary's register as 1922, but her civil death registration says she was born in 1914. She is said to be buried in the cemetery at St Malachy's Church in Carrickcruppen in the parish of Lower Killeavy, though there is no entry for her in the burial ground register. However, it should be noted that the reason for her name being omitted from the register is possibly because it contains a large gap from December 1971 up to January 1979. There are only two entries in the register in that period, both of which are dated 1978 and neither of them linked to St Mary's, Newry.

The last of the five deaths which occurred at the convent is for a woman who had been in St Mary's, Newry for over 30 years at the time of her death, in 1980. In her testimony, Sister 1 recalled the death of this woman and that she is buried in Carrickcruppen Cemetery, in a communal grave that also holds the remains of several babies of women who had been in Marianvale. There is a small headstone marking her resting place, though her burial is not noted in the register for Carrickcruppen despite the fact that the register recommences in January 1979.⁵⁴ The records reveal that she was one of the first women admitted to what was, in 1947, a new GSS St Mary's institution. At that point, she was already in middle age, having been born in 1898. Her previous address was a residential home in Warrenpoint.⁵⁵

In testimony shared by Priest 2, he recalled a small number of funerals taking place in the Newry convent's chapel for women who had worked in its laundry, although no specifics were recalled.⁵⁶ What can be said is that of the five women known to have died in Newry, secondary evidence suggests that two are interred at Carrickcruppen and one in Ardmore, and the places of burial of the two women who died in 1954 and 1956 remain unknown.

Further details about the five women who died in places other than in Newry is noted below in section 12.2 on burials.

Outside of the ten deaths identified from the St Mary's register, Priest 2 also provided details (including the name) of a young, unmarried woman who, aged 18, was sent to St Mary's, Newry following the birth of her second baby. While working in the laundry, it was noted that she was unwell, apparently suffering from heart problems. She was said to have died in a nearby hospital, in 1974.⁵⁷ However, no death certificate could be located for this young woman, but evidence of her death was discovered in an anniversary notice (marking the third anniversary of her death) published by her relatives in a local newspaper.

Finally, the admissions register indicates that another woman was sent from the Derry/Londonderry Good Shepherd Convent to Newry in July 1947 and that she died there only three months later. However, no record of her death was discovered in the admissions register for the Derry/Londonderry laundry, nor was any trace found of a civil death registration for her. There are no further details on this woman's age or background in the Newry records.

For each of the ten women identified from the St Mary's, Newry records, the following list notes their year of death, age and cause of death; in two instances (those marked '§') it was not possible to state the cause of death because no civil death registration could be found, and unfortunately it was not a general practice to note the cause of death in the St Mary's, Newry records. The two women only partially identified from sources other than St Mary's records (one died in 1947 and the other in 1974) are not included in this list.

Table 1: Cause of death of women at St Mary's, Newry

Year	Age	Cause of death
1951	22	Tubercular meningitis; tubercular enteritis
1954	76	Coronary thrombosis
1956	73	Cerebral haemorrhage
1973	50	1a. Carcinoma of left breast, 1b. secondaries in liver
1977	35	Cardiorespiratory failure; stricture of the oesophagus
1978	63	1a. Coronary thrombosis, 1b. hypertension
1980	82	1a. Myocardial ischaemia, 1b arteriosclerosis, 1c. senility
1985	19	Secondary carcinoma of liver, lung and bones
1990§	66	Unknown ⁵⁸
2005§	Unknown	Unknown

12.1 Civil death registration of girls and women from St Mary's, Newry

Searches for civil death registrations for the ten women listed in St Mary's, Newry registers identified eight records. The remaining two were not traceable based upon the information recorded in the GSS records. In all cases where death certificates were obtained, the causes of death were noted as having been certified by a medical practitioner. All the women were recorded as single. The registration districts in which the eight deaths were registered are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Districts of death registrations

Registration district	No.
Belfast	1
Cork	1
Newry	5
No death certificate identified	2
Waterford	1

The occupations recorded on the death certificates that have been traced are set out in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Occupations recorded on death certificates

Occupation	No.	Location
Cook	1	Belfast
Domestic	1	Newry
Housekeeper	1	Newry
Laundress/laundry worker	2	Waterford and Cork
Not recorded on death certificate	2	Both Newry
Of no occupation	1	Newry

For details about regulations pertaining to civil registration in NI please see the discussion of deaths and burials in the chapter on Access to Records, Advocacy, Genealogy and Legal Services.

12.2 Burials of girls and women from St Mary's, Newry

Evidence has been sought to identify the various places of burial for the ten women, but with virtually no success other than through oral evidence. The ten can be divided into two groups: five who are known to have died in Newry, and five who died elsewhere.

Of the five who died in Newry, it would be expected that they might be buried at Carrickcruppen Cemetery, which is the local burial ground closest to the convent. However, it may be just as likely that a family member may have claimed the woman's remains for burial elsewhere, possibly the family homeplace.

The five deaths in Newry occurred in the years 1954, 1956, 1973, 1978 and 1980. None of these five appear in the Carrickcruppen burial register, which commenced on 8 January 1948 and is still in use by the local parish (Lower Killeavy, which is also known as Bessbrook). However, unfortunately it contains an extensive gap for the period from December 1971 to January 1979, with only two entries appearing in that time, both of which are dated 1978. Two of the five deaths which occurred in Newry fall into that period, those for 1973 and 1978. That for 1973 is likely not relevant because the records of St Mary's, Newry note that this woman was buried at Ardmore, the Catholic parish burial ground predominantly used by St Mary's, Derry/Londonderry. As already noted above, the woman who died in 1978 is said to have been interred at Carrickcruppen, but the burial register is defective for that period.

As also noted above, the woman who died in 1980 is recalled in the testimony given by Sister 1 as being buried in Carrickcruppen Cemetery, but her name does not appear in the cemetery's register which, after it came back into use by the parish, appears complete from January 1979 onwards. However, this woman's death is recorded on a small memorial stone placed in more recent years on the plot in Carrickcruppen.

For the two earlier deaths in Newry, 1954 and 1956, no entry appears for either in the Carrickcruppen burial register, nor is there any reference to their place of burial noted in the records of St Mary's, Newry.

The remaining five women died in other places in the years 1951, 1977, 1985, 1990 and 2005, and for two of these no civil death registration was identifiable based upon the information recorded in the registers of St Mary's, Newry.

For the woman who died in 1951, her death certificate noted that she died in the Waterford County Hospital (the former Workhouse) but with a home address of the Good Shepherd Convent, Waterford. According to the records of St Mary's, Newry, Waterford was this woman's place of origin. Again, the death certificate for the woman who died in 1977 recorded that her death occurred in a hospital in Co Cork. Her home address, at that time, was noted as the Good Shepherd Hostel, Sunday's Well, Cork City.

The death of the woman who died in 1985 was registered in Belfast. She was aged just 19 at the time of her death and she died in a nursing home, but with her then home address given as the Good Shepherd Convent, Ormeau Road, Belfast. Her death was registered by a close relative who also placed a funeral acknowledgement notice in a local newspaper in which several people were thanked with regard to their assistance with the funeral. The wording of the newspaper notice would suggest that the burial took place in a nearby town (location redacted).

The records of St Mary's noted that the woman who died in 1990 had been born on a specific date in 1924, and that she had died in Dublin. However, this did not assist in identifying a death registration for her either in RoI or in NI. A possible death registration was found in Co Tyrone in 1992, but upon further examination it was not clear that the record referred to her.

Finally, the information in St Mary's, Newry admissions registers for the woman who was recorded as having died in 2005 was not particularly detailed. There was no date of birth recorded for her or any age noted at the time of her admission, which occurred in 1956. She was sent to Newry by the GSS in Sunday's Well, Cork City. She was discharged in 1959, but it is unclear if she then went to the GSS in Dublin or in Limerick. An exact date of death was recorded for her in St Mary's, Newry records, but no relevant civil death registration could be found for her in either RoI or NI, nor could any newspaper death notice be identified. Under such circumstances, seeking a record of her burial was not possible.

13.0 Conclusion

This assessment of the GSS St Mary's, Newry suggests that it operated in a very similar fashion to its equivalent institutions in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. It accommodated a multigenerational and complex range of girls and women. Although the GSS view Newry as having admitted fewer girls (under-18s) than the other two St Mary's institutions, the data included in this chapter suggests that was only marginally the case (around 38% under 18 as opposed to around 42% in Belfast). Referrals to the institution were from a similar range of individuals and organisations, including welfare committees, the Special Care Committee, police officers, members of the clergy and other religious orders, and the families of the girls and women involved.

Those admitted had similar experiences involved in their pathways to St Mary's, Newry. They included those sent by the courts on various Place of Safety Orders, those admitted as 'special care' cases, victims-survivors of incest or rape, individuals with alcohol dependency and without family support, individuals fleeing abusive partners, young women who were sent to 'the class' after they had given birth outside of marriage, and girls and young women identified as being in 'moral danger'. The GSS may well argue that this complex range of individuals is evidence of their principle that no one deemed to be in need should be turned away by the Order.

The HIAI heard evidence about St Mary's, Newry that suggested it operated a regimented culture and repetitive work regime. The HIAI was critical of the policy of renaming new arrivals, imposing silence during meals and punishing infringements of rules in 'a cruel and demeaning fashion' as concluded by the HIAI.⁵⁹ The HIAI agreed that the St Mary's institutions and their laundries became slightly more liberal from the late 1960s. This has been linked to a liberal shift in Catholic ideology after the Second Vatican Council. As Sister 1 also explained in her testimony, increasing financial support from the state produced changes within the institution. In the testimony shared about St Mary's, Newry, references were made in comments about the receipt of 'pocket money' for the first time, increased educational opportunities via evening classes, and the employment of 'lay-employees' who came in to work in the laundry.

The testimonies also provided numerous important insights on daily life in St Mary's, Newry and its impact on the girls and women who were admitted there. For example, the testimony of OC about her mother included the sad detail that, at 14, and a survivor of rape, pregnancy and the adoption of her son, she was sent to St Mary's by her father and remained there for seven years. Despite this she told OC of how grateful she was to the nuns who she met during her time in the institution. The other testimonies expressed very different emotions about St Mary's, Newry. As is the case with some of the testimony about the other St Mary's institutions, testimonies here by Mary Nolan, Bernadette Nolan and SC, among others, reveal fear and apprehension as dominant sentiments. All describe their concern that they were set to grow old in the institution like the elderly women who they encountered working in its laundry.

They also include significant testimony from a schoolgirl working in the laundry, the apparent continuation of regimes of silence into the 1970s and the routinisation that

was symbolised by the ritualistic tolling of the bell to demarcate the time to move to the day's next activity. Testimonies from the two GSS are also extremely valuable and indicate, for example, that the welfare committees were intimately involved in the work of St Mary's, Newry and used it regularly as a resource through which to meet their own operational needs. Testimony from the Sisters also indicates the way in which a girl or woman's departure from a St Mary's institution was managed. They suggest a process of negotiation with the Sister in Charge. It is interesting to contrast that with a number of testimonies across the three St Mary's institutions that suggest at least some women had no knowledge of when or how they could leave. This important subject of freedom of the person is also raised in notes from the GSS admissions records indicating that a priest advised that a 23-year-old woman should be sent from Marianvale to St Mary's for a period of 'reorientation' before she re-entered the outside world. This is one of countless examples of how the brevity of the notes does not allow for a full understanding of what took place and what contribution this young woman made to the discussion before she entered St Mary's, Newry.

Other themes raised in this chapter include whether women who remained in the St Mary's institutions for lengthy periods lost out on a full pension because they had not paid National Insurance despite to all intents and purposes working a full working week in the laundry. The analysis of death and burial records has revealed a number of unanswered questions about places of burial and appropriate certification processes that the public inquiry will want to address before it can satisfy itself on this important matter.

Chapter 5

Thorndale Industrial Home



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** Sources used in writing this chapter
- 2.0** Historical background of Thorndale Industrial Home
- 3.0** What is known about the finances of Thorndale Industrial Home
- 4.0** How many girls and women were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home
- 5.0** Where did girls and women admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home come from
- 6.0** How long did girls and women stay in Thorndale Industrial Home
- 7.0** Who sent girls and women to Thorndale Industrial Home
- 8.0** What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home
- 9.0** What the records tell us about daily life in Thorndale Industrial Home
- 10.0** Where girls and women went when they left Thorndale Industrial Home
- 11.0** Conclusion

Readers' advisory

Readers of this chapter are reminded that when quoting from historical records, newspaper reports and other contemporary sources, it is necessary to use the terminology and language that was used at the time. The Panel is aware that such terms can be upsetting and unacceptable and that they would not be used today. These terms are used as little as possible in all the chapters of this report but may appear in quoted sections. It is important to make the point that institutional records and reports are reflective of the creator's viewpoint and should not be considered conclusive nor definitive of the practices and processes of the institution. Nor should they be considered to be evidential or impartial in relation to the institutions themselves or the women and girls who were admitted to them. This report discusses issues that readers will find upsetting. These include subjects such as incest, rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence, family separation and poor mental health.

The written records relating to Thorndale Industrial Home present a partial account of the institution, how it was run, and the lives of the women and girls who stayed there. The lack of detail captured in short case notes on the individual women and girls that entered the institution leaves numerous questions either partially answered or not addressed at all. This is particularly true in terms of the emotional inner lives and family details of girls and women who entered the institution.

1.0 Sources used in writing this chapter

- Salvation Army 'Country Series' Statement Books (1922–55)
- New Assisted Cases Books (1922–55)¹

The records for the Salvation Army institutions, which are held in the Salvation Army International Heritage Centre in London, are quite complex. To determine admissions to Thorndale Industrial Home, the New Assisted Cases Books were used, which only record new admissions and not any readmissions. In addition, the Country Statement Books were used as they do not include the new assisted cases. As the Country Statement Books include maternity cases as well, the 'industrial' cases were separated from these.

2.0 Historical background of Thorndale Industrial Home

The Salvation Army's work with women in Belfast began in 1886 when it opened a 'rescue home' at 63 Great George Street, in the city centre. Religious institutions that deemed it their task to 'rescue' and 'reform' girls and women involved in sex work or in danger of becoming involved in it have a long history in Europe, going as far back as the eleventh century. They referred to themselves variously as 'refuges for penitents', 'houses of repentance' and 'hostels of God'.² The Salvation Army's female officers were heavily involved in the organisation's 'rescue' work with other women and girls.

This element of their ‘social ministry’ began in 1884 when the organisation opened an institution for ‘rescued prostitutes and unwed mothers’ in London.³ Florence Booth, the wife of Bramwell Booth, the Second General of the Salvation Army, led this ministry to the ‘fallen’, which ‘sought to redeem young women through loving maternal influences and godly discipline’. The Salvation Army’s aim was to transform the ‘fallen’ into ‘pious and productive examples of conventional femininity’. The girls and women under their authority were taught skills deemed to prepare them for ‘domestic service and later married life’.⁴ In the mindset of the Salvation Army, ‘fallen women’ was a broadly defined term, including heavy alcohol users, those with drug dependencies and the homeless, as well as those involved in sex work.⁵ It is notable that girls and women could be ‘fallen’, but boys and young men were not labelled in the same way. There were no institutions labelled as ‘rescue homes’ for ‘fallen boys’.

In 1905, the Salvation Army moved its Belfast base to Wellington Park on the Malone Road, where the facility was described as an ‘industrial home’, or a ‘shelter for young women’. In a letter to the editor of the *Belfast News-Letter*, in 1911, a Salvation Army representative wrote:



Our homes may be regarded as havens of refuge, where many poor helpless and storm-tossed souls have had a chance to recover themselves and start afresh the battles of life.

He maintained that the institution ‘has done excellent work for hundreds of wayward souls who come from all parts of the country’.⁶

The ‘industrial home’ and ‘shelter’ moved to Thorndale House off the Antrim Road in the north of the city in 1922. In addition to the ‘industrial home’, the ‘shelter’ provided short-term accommodation for women in need, often for a stay as short as one or two nights. The ‘industrial home’ was refocused as ‘a girls’ training home’ in 1948 and continued in this role until its closure in 1955. The records indicate that admissions to the institution reduced considerably by the 1950s with an end date of 1955.



Thorndale House, Antrim Road Belfast (precise date unknown, early 1980s), photo supplied by Salvation Army International Heritage Centre

The records provide few details of the type of work that was carried out in Thorndale Industrial Home. However, a Salvation Army blog does assist in this respect. It observes that by World War One, the organisation had ‘a small stake in the textile industry through its women’s industrial homes’, where girls and women ‘undertook needlework, producing sewn garments and embroidery’. Its description of the industrial ‘homes’ suggests that there were parallels with the Good Shepherd Sisters (GSS) St Mary’s institutions and their laundries in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry.

“

These industrial homes were run on charitable lines: the women and girls were not paid a wage for their labour but were provided with fully catered accommodation for the duration of their training. The proceeds from the sale of their products were treated as contributions towards their maintenance, with any excess going towards the Salvation Army’s charitable work more widely.⁷

Most of the products made were sold by pedlars selling door-to-door on behalf of the Salvation Army. Like the GSS and other religious orders (both Catholic and Protestant) that operated laundries, the Salvation Army benefited from the free labour of the girls and women sent to its industrial ‘homes’. They remained for much shorter periods of time than girls and women sent to Magdalene laundries. This is one reason why they have not received the levels of media and public interest placed on the Magdalene laundries. A second reason is that the Salvation Army industrial homes were closed much sooner (1955 in the case of the Thorndale Industrial Home) than the Magdalene laundries, many of which continued into the 1970s, 1980s and even the 1990s. The continuing existence of the Magdalene laundries at that point brought levels of scrutiny based on growing appreciation of human rights. However, the chapters on the GSS St Mary’s institutions

explain that their laundries were already the focus of some criticism from the 1890s. This is something that the Salvation Army Industrial Homes appear to have avoided. The Panel has found no contemporary discussion in newspapers or the UK Parliament about the nature of the work being carried out by girls and women in the Salvation Army industrial homes.

A further partial similarity between the Salvation Army industrial home and the GSS St Mary's institutions was in terms of the incorporation of the girls and women into the organisations. Some of those who entered a GSS St Mary's institution ended up dedicating their lives to remaining there as a consecrated Magdalen Sister (later Sister of the Cross and later still Contemplative Sister). However, they could not become a Good Shepherd Sister. Girls and women who had been in a Salvation Army industrial home often joined the 'Army' and became a Salvationist. Indeed, the organisation made much of 'conversion' stories in seeking to recruit new members to the organisation.



A few women, like Nancy 'Dickybird' Cunningham and Jane Johnson, 'Champion Drunkards of the World', were already renowned in their own communities and built on that reputation as preachers. However, the Army usually presented women as examples of faith in the face of suffering and possessors of a righteousness that triumphed over sin.⁸

Newspaper reports on activities at Thorndale Industrial Home during the 1930s offer insights into aspects of the institution. In 1930 one report claimed that 'many young motherless girls were taken care of in the industrial home'. It stated that there was 'accommodation for 21 inmates' who had 'many varied histories'. It maintained that 'the love, oversight and kindly discipline of the officers have had good results'. They revealed that their 'secret of success' involved 'keeping in touch with the girls when they left the home'. This was done via the 'Aftercare Home' that the 'girls' could visit for teas or if they were out of employment or wanted to take 'a holiday'. The article claimed that visits to 'the Home last month by the girls numbered more than 600'.⁹

Another report 12 months later wrote that Thorndale Industrial Home was where 'girls who had become out of hand were looked after'. It claimed that many of them were looked upon in the police court as 'incorrigibles'. They had been living in circumstances of 'moral danger'. For that reason, 'preventative work' was of the 'highest importance'. At that time there were 30 'girls' there. It then offered some insight into the work they carried out: 'A feature of their dealings with all girls who came under their care was that they were not kept in idleness but were taught to work to help themselves'.¹⁰

3.0 What is known about the finances of Thorndale Industrial Home

There are no surviving financial records directly related to the activities of Thorndale Industrial Home. In cases where girls or women were sent there on probation or from the courts, the state must have been invoiced for the costs associated with their

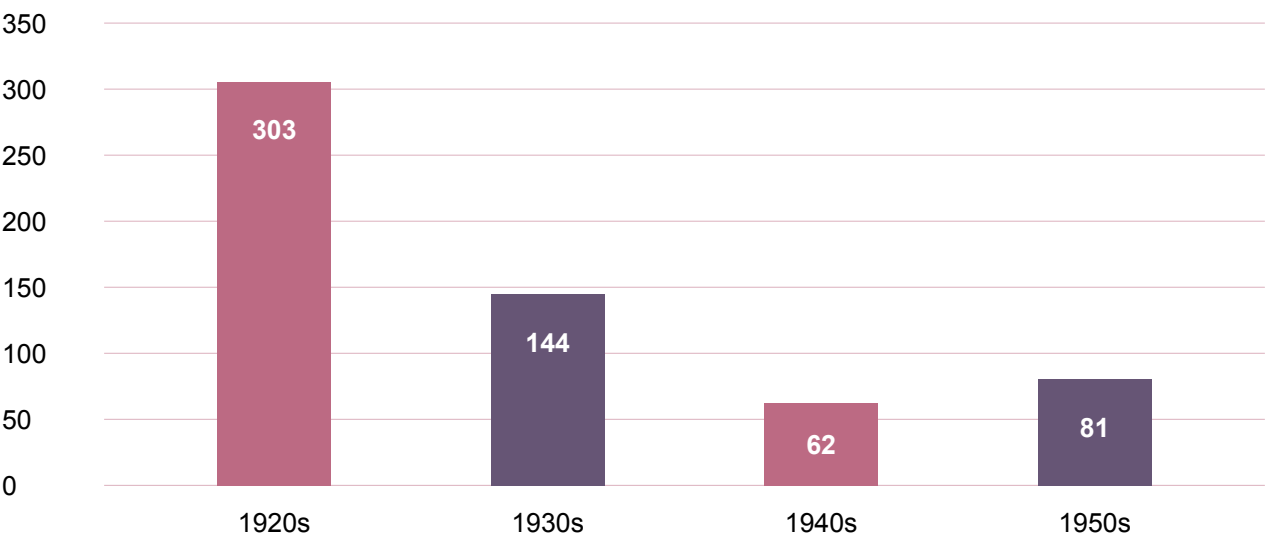
accommodation. It is known that, as a charitable institution, the Salvation Army appealed for donations. For example, in the lead up to Christmas in 1907 the *Belfast News-Letter* published an advertisement appealing for financial support for the work of the Salvation Army industrial home.¹¹

In addition, as has just been explained, the embroidery products made by the girls and women in Thorndale Industrial Home were sold by pedlars to raise money. They were also sold at the annual summer fairs that were held in the grounds of Thorndale Industrial Home. Those attending that event in June 1939 learned that the ‘industry of the girls’ had raised £430 in the previous year. This was in the context of overall expenditure at Thorndale Industrial Home being £2,272.¹² Reliance on charitable donations was significant therefore, and it is notable that, like Hopedene Hostel and Kennedy House, Thorndale House relied on the patronage of socially elite women to advocate for financial support. In the early 1930s, the guests of honour at the annual garden party included Lady Abercorn (the wife of the Governor of Northern Ireland [NI]) and Lady Craigavon (the wife of the Prime Minister of NI). The Salvation Army also raised funds from sales of its newspaper *The War Cry* and from street collections. This would have been in addition to any funding from welfare committees.

4.0 How many girls and women were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

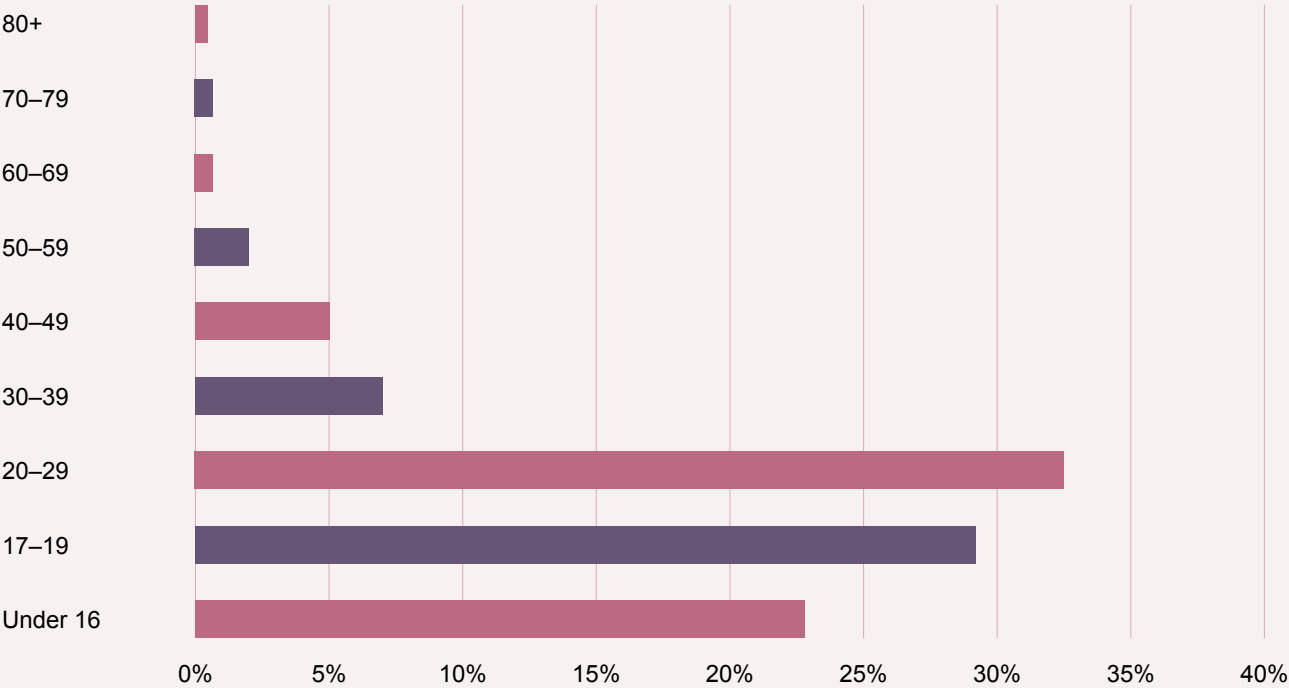
As shown in **Figure 1**, 590 women and girls were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home between 1922 and 1955. Numbers were highest in the 1920s before gradually declining. The highest numbers were admitted in 1922, with 66 admissions. Thereafter, annual admissions were below 20 per year, the one exception being the 26 admissions in 1953.

Figure 1: Number of girls and women who were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home per decade, 1922–55



As shown in **Figure 2**, of the 540 women and girls for whom age was recorded, the majority of those admitted were below 30. The oldest woman admitted was an 85-year-old in 1922 who stayed one day. She was described as ‘restless’ and went home. At the other end of the spectrum was a nine-year-old child who was admitted in 1933. She was described as a ‘preventative case’ and ‘taken from bad surroundings, not fallen’. The latter word was a term used at this time to indicate a woman who had lost her virginity and it implied Christian attitudes to sinfulness. It reflects the gendered terms and labelling that appear in institutional records like these. This terminology would not have been used in the context of a young boy. This child stayed for a couple of weeks and attended a local school. She was then transferred to ‘The Nest’ in Clapton, London, which was a Salvation Army children’s institution that had been established because the organisation wanted to separate very young girls from older girls and women who were deemed to have ‘fallen’.¹³

Figure 2: Age of girls and women admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home



	Under 16	17–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80+
No. of girls and women	123	158	176	37	27	11	3	3	2
%	22.8	29.3	32.6	6.9	5.0	2.0	0.6	0.6	0.4

5.0 Where did girls and women admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home come from

The records sometimes record both where women were born and their last address before they were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home. The last address was not always included; however, for the 495 records where the place of birth was recorded, most women and girls were from Belfast, as shown in **Table 1**.

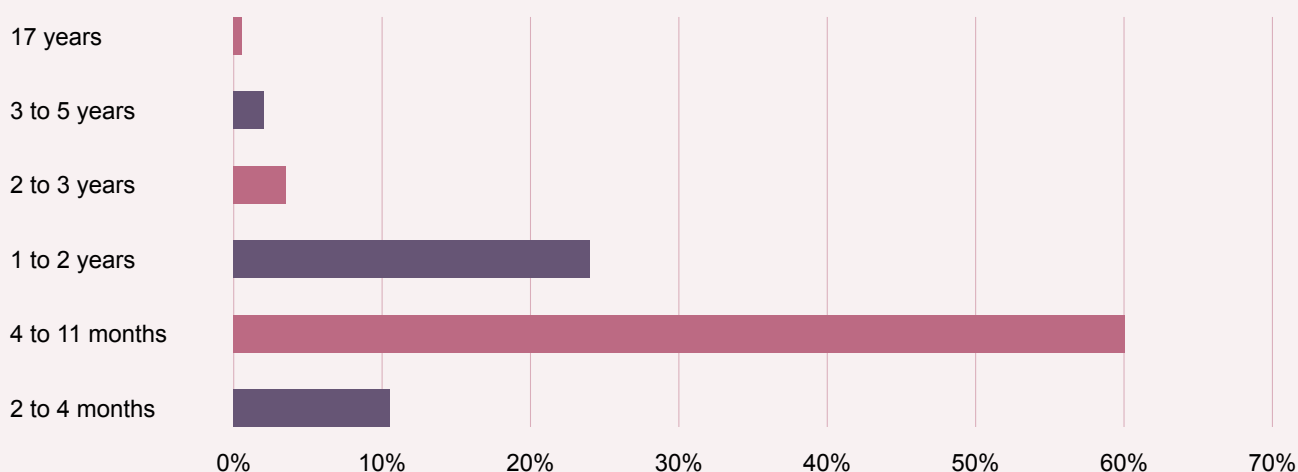
Table 1: Address of girls and women before they were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

Location	Percentage	No.
Belfast	53.9	267
Republic of Ireland	9.9	49
Co Down	9.3	46
Co Antrim	5.1	25
Co Fermanagh	4.9	24
Co Tyrone	4.6	23
Co Armagh	3.6	18
Derry/Londonderry (county and city)	3.8	19
Scotland	2.6	13
England and Wales	1.8	9
Europe	0.4	2

6.0 How long did girls and women stay in Thorndale Industrial Home

The length of time girls and women stayed in Thorndale Industrial Home varied considerably, from an overnight stay to a woman who remained there for 17 years. For those individuals whose admission was recorded in the New Assisted Cases Books, their time in the institution was mostly under one month. The Statement Books contain records for girls and women who remained for longer periods of time. **Figure 3** illustrates the length of stay of the 280 girls and women who remained in Thorndale Industrial Home for longer than two months.

Figure 3: Length of time girls and women stayed in Thorndale Industrial Home



	2 to 4 months	4 to 11 months	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	3 to 5 years	17 years
No. of girls and women	29	168	67	10	5	1
%	10.4	60.0	23.9	3.6	1.8	0.4

The woman who stayed for 17 years (referenced in **Figure 3**) arrived in 1932 and left, aged 42, in 1949 to take up employment in a hospital. No further detail about why she was admitted was recorded but the form does say that she became an ‘S.A. Soldier’, meaning that she became a member of the Salvation Army. She may, therefore, have remained in Thorndale in some kind of employment capacity. The second-longest recorded stay was four and a half years for a woman who was admitted in 1933 and left in 1937. She was recorded as having been ‘brought’ by Viscountess Charlemont and was described as ‘mentally deficient’. She left for the union infirmary, which was the hospital in Belfast Union Workhouse.

7.0 Who sent girls and women to Thorndale Industrial Home

The information provided about who sent girls and women is often quite vague with ‘brought’ or ‘sent’ being recorded and no further information about who was involved in the process. Of the 545 women and girls for whom this information is recorded, 163 (29.9%) were recorded as being referred or brought ‘personal’ or ‘personally’. These would appear to be situations where women or girls needed accommodation for a short period of time before leaving for a job or when they found their own lodging. Thirty-one (5.7%) women and girls simply had ‘brought’ or ‘sent’ recorded without any further information, and in 23 (4.2%) cases the name of an individual was recorded but it is not clear who they are. For 67 (12.3%) women and girls, ‘family’ or ‘friends’ is recorded as the source of referral.

Seventy-one (13.0%) referrals came from the Salvation Army, either from individuals or through other Salvation Army institutions. In nine (1.7%) cases, a clergyman was the source of referral. In addition, 20 (3.7%) women were referred from other institutions. The role of social workers and welfare workers increased as the years passed with 52 (9.5%) women and girls referred that way. Six (1.1%) girls were referred by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Sixty-four (11.7%) women and girls were referred from the police court and 19 (3.5%) from the police directly. A further 20 (3.7%) were referred by probation officers.

8.0 What reasons were given for why girls and women were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

8.1 Girls and women who were sent by the courts or probation service to Thorndale Industrial Home

The probation service drew heavily on local voluntary societies in the early twentieth century, before it 'saw an infusion of new full-time probation officers into the service in Belfast' following World War Two.¹⁴ The Salvation Army were closely involved in probation work and in Derry/Londonderry three probation officers were appointed in 1916. One of them was a Salvation Army officer. In Belfast, the courts quickly established a working relationship with the Salvation Army's Wellington Park Rescue Home, 'resulting in the home giving places to women who had been through the court system'.¹⁵ Like representatives of other institutions, including the GSS, members of the Salvation Army attended courts to offer to accommodate women and girls in their institution. A newspaper report in 1931 described this outreach.



[The Salvation] Army officers visited the Police Court three times a week and received from the magistrates the care of first offenders. Thus, they were able to save many young persons from the stigma of prison life, and that of itself meant a sound lift towards respectability and virtuous living.¹⁶

Sixty-four women and girls are recorded as coming directly from court to the Thorndale Industrial Home. Going to this institution may have been offered as an alternative to imprisonment for Protestant women (with the GSS and their St Mary's institutions offered as an alternative to imprisonment for Catholic women). This was the case with those who were 'first-time offenders' or who had committed a crime where prison may not have been regarded as the most suitable punishment.

Examples of this included six cases involving infanticide or concealment of birth.¹⁷ The practice of sending women and girls convicted of infanticide or concealment of birth to institutions such as Thorndale Industrial Home or the GSS St Mary's institutions was 'not uncommon' in NI but not as 'widespread as it was in the South'.¹⁸ A 24-year-old was admitted in January 1925, following a phone call from a police officer to the Salvation Army after she had pleaded guilty to 'concealment of birth by placing the body of an infant in a trunk'. Her sentencing was not until March 1925 when 'an official of the

Salvation Army' said they were 'quite willing to take charge of the accused if she were allowed out'.¹⁹ She was released 'on her own bail of £10' and remained for a year in Thorndale Industrial Home and then left for a job in Co Tipperary. A 22-year-old who 'broke down' in court where she pleaded guilty to infanticide in 1925 was sent 'to the Salvation Army Home for six months' after an officer of the Salvation Army 'stated that she would be looked after by that organisation'. The judge 'expressed the hope that she would be guided by the advice given there'.²⁰ She did remain in Thorndale Industrial Home for six months before leaving to take up a domestic service situation. A 30-year-old admitted in 1928, having been found guilty of concealment of birth, stayed for 11 months before emigrating to Canada. Newspaper and court records indicate that a woman who was convicted of concealment of birth was allowed out on bail 'on an undertaking to go for six months to the Salvation Army Home' in 1931.²¹ A 24-year-old woman was found guilty of infanticide in 1938 and 'on an undertaking to go to the Salvation Army Home for training in domestic service, was bound over by Lord Justice Best for two years'.²² However, she refused to stay in Thorndale Industrial Home and was taken back to court where a judge sentenced her to six months in prison with hard labour.

A 31-year-old woman was given board and lodgings for a week in 1932, after the bodies of four babies were found in her suitcase in the home where she was a domestic servant. She was subsequently sent to Armagh Prison for nine months.

The registers for Armagh Prison include women and girls convicted of other crimes who were sent to the Thorndale Industrial Home. For example, in 1927 a 16-year-old girl was convicted of the theft of an attaché case, a woollen coat, a camera, and other articles and money to the value of £14. The court released her 'to the custody of...the Salvation Army on the accused recognisance of £10 to keep the peace and good behaviour for two years during that time to remain under the dominion of the officer of the Salvation Army'.²³ Although the industrial home closed in 1955, there were still some further probation admissions after this date. In 1956, a 22-year-old married woman from Belfast was convicted of theft. She was put 'on probation for 12 months under Miss Harvey on her own bail of £5 with a condition that she reside in Thorndale House Duncairn Ave Belfast'.²⁴ Harvey was a full-time probation officer. In 1962, a 21-year-old was convicted of obtaining money by forging documents. Her 12-month probation order included the condition that three months were spent at Thorndale House.²⁵

A 16-year-old was admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home in 1938, having been found guilty of stealing a pair of boots and a handbag from her mother and a coat from a woman who had given her a bed for the night. In addition, the newspaper article about her trial explained that she had 'run away from home three times and was beyond control'. Her father pleaded for another chance for her and said: 'she is in love with these pictures [by which he meant the cinema] and one thing and another and when she gets out, she goes wild'. She 'consented to go into the Salvation Army Home for a year and on this condition, she was placed under the care of Miss Curran, Probation Officer'.²⁶ She remained in Thorndale Industrial Home for over eight months before returning home.

Salvation Army officers also took further decisions on behalf of some of the girls and women committed to their supervision under probation orders. An 18-year-old, who was 'given into the army's care on 12 months' probation' after a conviction for theft, in 1935, was taken by Major Gill to Liverpool as it was felt she 'should get away from bad companions'.

Probation officers were also involved in bringing girls and women who were crime victims to Thorndale Industrial Home. In 1923, Miss Curran, the probation officer, brought a 15-year-old girl whose notes explained that her parents had died several years before and that 'her guardian's nephew seduced her and gave her VD'. She was very ill and was 'sent to Ward 26 [the female Venereal Disease Ward at the Belfast Workhouse Infirmary]' where the doctor 'had the case investigated and the young man was sent to prison for six months'.

8.2 Girls and women who were sent by the police to Thorndale Industrial Home

As with the GSS St Mary's institutions, Thorndale Industrial Home was also used by the police when they needed emergency accommodation for girls and women. An 18-year-old was brought to Thorndale Industrial Home by the police in 1931 and was given board and lodging for a month before she then returned home. Her notes describe her as an 'inveterate smoker and lazy'. When a 20-year-old was brought by the police in 1954, the reason entered for her admittance was 'association with undesirable characters and houses'. The latter point was an insinuation that she had been in brothels or suspected brothels. She stayed for one night and then went home. From the 1950s, there were an increasing number of women admitted who had been evicted from their houses and who needed emergency accommodation for a few nights.

8.3 Girls and women who were sent to by their families to Thorndale Industrial Home

Families also placed women and girls in Thorndale Industrial Home when they had concerns about their behaviour. Speaking at the Thorndale Annual Garden Party in July 1931, Commissioner Booth-Tucker said: 'young girls today got out of hand and their parents did not know what to do with them. They usually fell into the hands of the police who brought them to the Salvation Army, where they found a haven of rest and became leaders in good'.²⁷ The following year's garden party also heard about these cases.

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[The] Industrial Department dealt with girls who had passed through the police courts as first offenders. Instead of their receiving imprisonment the home was willing to receive them and give them a fresh start. The Industrial Department also assist another type of girl, who was simply friendless, helping her to learn a craft and to find a position.²⁸

The notes of a 17-year-old admitted in 1927 described how she had ‘bobbed her hair and her parents were annoyed’²⁹ and she had then ‘thrown herself in the Lagan’. She had been taken to the police station and brought to Thorndale Industrial Home, where she stayed for about six weeks.

8.4 Girls and women recorded as having mental health issues who were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

There were 22 women and girls described as ‘mental’ or ‘mentally deficient’ in the Salvation Army records. We should treat this descriptive language with some caution, as often women whose behaviour was deemed to have stepped outside the norms of mainstream society were labelled mentally as well as morally deficient. The notes on a 20-year-old admitted in 1930 record: ‘this case should never have been taken from the asylum as mentally deficient’. A 19-year-old who was admitted in 1932 was described as ‘mentally deficient and wayward’. A 16-year-old girl who was admitted in 1945 and only stayed a few days had been sent by her parents, as she was ‘very sour and sat in her bedroom all day at home’. Her parents thought that ‘a few weeks with a crowd of people might help her’. However, the Salvation Army note-keeper concluded that she ‘appears to be mentally unbalanced’.

8.5 Girls and women with addiction issues who were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

The forms and registers for Thorndale Industrial Home asked a question about whether the woman or girl admitted was a ‘drink case’. In 31 instances ‘yes’ was recorded although this was a declining factor in admissions after the 1920s. This was a similar trend to that witnessed in the GSS St Mary’s institutions in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, which may reflect changing medical practice around the treatment of alcohol addiction.

In 1934, a 31-year-old woman was described as a ‘drink case’ and as having been in prison. She remained in the Thorndale Industrial Home for a month and her notes record that the Salvation Army ‘kept L.G. in the hope of her turning from her wasted life but the old temptations proved too strong however, and she chose to return to her old haunts’. A 46-year-old woman was admitted in 1932, as her husband wanted her to stay for six months to ‘come off her drug habit’. However, she was ‘very restless and would not stay’. A 20-year-old who had come from Dublin in 1925 ‘had several fainting fits and wanted to get out into the open air’. The doctor was called but nothing was found to be wrong with her, and the notes recorded that the Salvation Army ‘felt she put a lot on, especially when she was found smoking in the back yard’. She was sent back to Dublin.

8.6 Girls and women who were destitute or homeless and admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home

Twenty-five women and girls who were recorded as being destitute were admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home. For eight of these admissions, illness was an issue. They either came from the Belfast Workhouse Infirmary or were sent there. The notes of an 18-year-old admitted in 1942 recorded that it was 'discovered she suffered from incontinence and needed medical attention' and went to the infirmary. A 32-year-old admitted in 1923 came from the infirmary as she 'suffered from fits'.

Six women and girls were recorded as being homeless and given food and lodgings for a few days. In the 1950s six women were admitted who had been evicted from their homes and were given temporary accommodation until alternative accommodation was found. Also in need of accommodation was a 78-year-old woman, who arrived in 1954. It was noted that she lived alone and had been 'tormented by young boys'. She stayed for nine days until arrangements could be made for her to go to her daughter.

8.7 Girls and women who admitted for short-term or crisis accommodation to Thorndale Industrial Home

At least 12 women stayed for short periods of time having missed trains or boats, leaving them stranded in Belfast. These included an 81-year-old woman who was admitted in 1942 having been stranded at the railway station. She was sent later to the Home of Rest, which was a facility for the elderly.³⁰

9.0 What the records tell us about daily life in Thorndale Industrial Home

There is no information in the records about daily life in Thorndale Industrial Home. It is evident that, unlike the GSS St Mary's institutions, women did not work in a commercial laundry. However, labour of some kind was carried out. Attached to the front of one of the Thorndale Industrial Home Day Books were Factory Act Returns for 1946–48, indicating that the institution was a workplace subject to health and safety inspections. There was also a note which explained that an official communication had been received in reply advising that the laundry at Thorndale Industrial Home was not subject to the Factory and Workshop Act 1907, presumably as it was not a commercial laundry and served only those who lived in Thorndale Industrial Home.

There was some uncertainty here, however, as the return for 1946 stated that nine women were employed in work under the Factory Acts. Another 33 were described as 'otherwise engaged'; this appears to have involved needlework as a 'power-machine sewing machine' was also mentioned. In 1947, seven women were employed in the laundry and 16 otherwise engaged in the workroom.

Women were also expected to do cleaning and domestic chores, and there was a focus on training women and girls for domestic service situations, with the Salvation Army identifying many such jobs for the women. This training was not always successful. A child of 13 who was brought to Thorndale by her father in 1933 stayed for three months and was given 'board and lodging and some little training in housework'. However, she was described as a 'very lazy girl, untidy and sullen and should have stayed a long time to be really helped but her mother fetched her home'.

10.0 Where girls and women went when they left Thorndale Industrial Home

For 550 women and girls, it was possible to determine where they went when leaving Thorndale Industrial Home. The majority, 207 (37.6%), were recorded as leaving for a situation (meaning a job that the Salvation Army had arranged for them) or to find work for themselves. There is little detail recorded about where these jobs were. One 18-year-old who had come from the police court in 1928 and stayed for a year in Thorndale Industrial Home was recorded after she had left to be stealing 'petty things now and again. Apart from this doing excellently in situation.' A 17-year-old who was admitted in 1923 was described as 'very lazy and rude; refused to do her work and could not be recommended to a situation'. Forty-eight (8.7%) women have a named individual or an address recorded and it may be assumed this was the name or address of their new employer, although that is not specified.

One hundred and sixty-six (30.2%) women and girls left with family or friends. In some cases, this was viewed negatively by the Salvation Army, who felt that a longer stay would have been more beneficial. The notes of a 16-year-old girl, who stayed for three and a half months in 1928, stated: 'we wanted to make a case of her and make her an associate' in the Salvation Army, but 'her father came suddenly and wanted her to go home and we were very disappointed'. In a similar situation the following year, the notes of a 14-year-old stated: 'we tried to train' her but she 'had evidently had most of her own way previously and wanted to return home'. They went on to say that her mother 'while writing to us urging the advantage' of her daughter staying with the Salvation Army was also writing to her daughter 'offering to have her home if she wanted to come'.

Forty-eight (8.7%) women and girls left Thorndale Industrial Home to go to hospital. This included for both physical and mental health issues. A 39-year-old, who was admitted in 1925, was described in her notes as having done 'many strange things' and was 'sent to hospital'. In 1923, a 17-year-old went to the Belfast Workhouse Infirmary as her notes record 'we fear she is suffering from TB'. A 24-year-old admitted in 1937 'commenced taking epileptic fits' and the record explains that 'under doctor's orders she had to leave us and go under observation at the union infirmary'.

Twenty-nine (5.3%) women and girls were recorded as going to other institutions. For example, a 16-year-old in 1950 left Thorndale Industrial Home after nearly a year and a half and went to Whiteabbey Training School. A 27-year-old who had been admitted in 1954, having been sent by the court for stealing, left to go to Belfast Welfare Hostel.

Ten (1.8%) women were recorded as leaving in the care of welfare authorities or returning to prison; this included a 19-year-old who had been referred by a probation officer in 1933. Her notes state: 'would not stay and finally put her fist through a window and was sent back to court'.

Forty-three (7.8%) women and girls 'left wilfully', ran away or were dismissed. This included a 16-year-old admitted in 1954 who her notes record 'was to have stayed until her Probation Officer decided what to do with her', but she 'absconded the next day'. A 23-year-old who was admitted in 1931 'was beginning to show some improvement' according to her notes, but then 'she ran away with another girl'.

11.0 Conclusion

The Salvation Army industrial home shared some historical similarities with the GSS St Mary's institutions. There were common elements to the formation of these institutions in that they emerged from the 'rescue homes' movement of the Victorian era that saw evangelical Christians of all denominations attempt to counter what they viewed as the demoralisation of the urban working classes. They saw it as their Christian duty to reform girls and women who had 'fallen' or were at risk of 'falling' due to the moral dangers they encountered in Victorian cities like Belfast.

Like the GSS, the Salvation Army identified a life of piety and prayer alongside productive labour as the means through which to reform the girls and women admitted to Thorndale Industrial Home. Again, like the GSS, the Salvation Army appears to have admitted girls and young women who were referred by the courts, their own families, members of the clergy, the police and welfare workers. They also identified the 'friendless' as being among those who could benefit from their institutional moral guidance.

Over the course of three decades from 1922 the institution admitted over 500 girls and women, not an insignificant number. However, its comparatively early closure in 1955 means that many of those individuals are no longer living and able to provide testimony about daily life in this institution. As discussed earlier, Salvation Army industrial homes have not been the subject of either historical or contemporary debates about the conditions within them or how they operated practically and financially. This also reduces the prospect of any one woman who spent time in Thorndale Industrial Home coming forward with testimony about the institution. Frustratingly, that leaves this chapter without a vital insight into the lived experience of this particular institution. The Panel intends to liaise with the public inquiry to identify any means through which this gap in our understanding might be filled.

Chapter 6

Workhouses



Truth Recovery Independent Panel
Seeking the Truth

Chapter content

This chapter discusses:

- 1.0** Sources used in writing this chapter
- 2.0** Historical background of Workhouses
- 3.0** Unmarried girls and women entering Workhouses
- 4.0** Admissions to Workhouses in NI
- 5.0** Girls and women who gave birth in Workhouses
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Readers' advisory

Readers of this chapter are reminded that when quoting from historical records, newspaper reports and other contemporary sources, it is necessary to use the terminology and language that was used at the time.

The Panel is aware that such terms can be upsetting and unacceptable and that they would not be used today. These terms are used as little as possible in all the chapters of this report but may appear in quoted sections.

It is important to make the point that institutional records and reports are reflective of the creator's viewpoint and should not be considered conclusive nor definitive of the practices and processes of the institution. Nor should they be considered to be evidential or impartial in relation to the institutions themselves or the women and girls who were admitted to them. This report discusses issues that readers will find upsetting. These include subjects such as incest, rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, family separation and poor mental health.

In terms of testimonies, when speaking about their personal history, some individuals quote the terms that were derogatorily used about them or their children in the past. We will quote these terms as they appear in the testimonies cited.

The written records relating to Workhouses present a partial account of these institutions, how they were operated, and their impact on the lives of the pregnant girls and women who were admitted there to give birth.

1.0 Sources used in writing this chapter

1.1 Written records

Records of the following Boards of Guardians are available in the Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI): Antrim, Armagh, Ballycastle, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Belfast, Castlederg, Clogher, Coleraine, Cookstown, Derry/Londonderry, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Kilkeel, Larne, Limavady, Lisburn, Lisnaskea, Lurgan, Magherafelt, Newry, Newtownards, Omagh and Strabane.

There are different records available for each Board of Guardians, and some are more comprehensive than others. The records often date from the mid-nineteenth century and can include indoor and outdoor relief registers, minutes of a variety of committees and records relating to medical care. However, it is difficult to find complete records for Workhouses in the period 1922–48 and given the size of the Belfast Union Workhouse and its comprehensive records it has been focused on particularly in this chapter.

1.2 Testimonies

Testimonies used in this chapter are:

- those shared with the Panel during 2024–25
- those shared for use in the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU) report published in 2021.¹

2.0 Historical background of Workhouses

The Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838 led to the construction of 130 Poor Law Union Workhouses across Ireland, each run by a Board of Guardians. These Workhouses offered indoor and outdoor relief for the poor and destitute. From the 1860s, they increasingly offered medical care as 'eligibility to poor law medicine was extended beyond the destitute to encompass the general poor'.² In effect, at that time the majority of the population would, at least in some phase of their life cycle, be part of the 'general poor'.

It was the 1862 Poor Law Amendment Act that extended services provided by Workhouses to the general poor rather than the 'destitute' only.³ This legislation related to England and Wales and was followed, in Ireland, by the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act of the same year. Further changes were made in 1898 under the Local Government (Ireland) Act, which allowed local authorities to develop Workhouses into district hospitals that focused on short-term illnesses.⁴ This was also an attempt to remove the stigma of pauperism associated with the Workhouse. Though 15 Poor Law hospitals still existed in Northern Ireland (NI) by the late 1930s, the stigma of using Workhouse services remained.⁵

The Poor Law 'remained more influential in the region than elsewhere in the UK and provided the bulk of free health care, emergency accommodation and aid to the destitute'.⁶ In fact, 'Workhouse infirmaries were the most numerous and geographically diverse hospital network in the new Northern Irish state'.⁷ Although numerous, the Workhouse infirmaries were 'medically underdeveloped'. They were also 'mixed institutions', meaning that they were meeting the health needs of 'the elderly, the chronically ill, the young and the disabled poor'. They were widely seen as the most unattractive form of medical care in the new state and their 'pauper taint' ensured that those who found it necessary to seek care from a Workhouse infirmary were stigmatised.⁸



Belfast Workhouse (circa 1964), showing Cripples Wards (right), Separation Ward (left) and the Women's Yard (foreground), photo supplied by Deputy Keeper of the Records, PRONI, HOS/4/1/10/13

In England, Scotland and Wales the link between the Poor Law and the infirmaries was ended in 1929, but similar legislative changes did not take place in NI.⁹ Progress was also slower than might have been the case in NI as a result of the violence and sectarian political divisions enflamed by Partition.¹⁰ In chapters on some of the mother and baby institutions, the Panel has identified how violent conflict in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s impacted on those institutions, and it would appear that in the earlier period of sectarian violence the majority of Workhouses were 'in low-grade and unmodernized buildings'. A visit in 1938 by an expert from the British Medical Association described them as 'unfit in structure and equipment for modern medical and surgical work'. Most were without a resident medical official. A further report by British medical experts in the mid-1940s was also critical of NI's Workhouses, describing them as 'frankly repellent', using 'primitive types of sanitary appliances' and 'repulsive to those of us who live in happier circumstances'.¹¹



Belfast Workhouse (circa 1964), showing main building top-floor Workhouse Ward. The channel running down centre was to give additional height. The ‘inmates’ lay on straw in elevated portions of this ward. Photo supplied by Deputy Keeper of the Records, PRONI, HOS/4/1/10/10A



Belfast Workhouse (circa 1964), showing Workhouse staircase in the main Workhouse building, photo supplied by Deputy Keeper of the Records, PRONI, HOS/4/1/10/6

There were exceptions, where Poor Law Guardians did make investments, such as the Derry/Londonderry Poor Law fever hospital or the Banbridge Workhouse Infirmary. More broadly, improvements were made via the conversions of 12 Workhouses into district hospitals, a move described by Donnacha Seán Lucey.

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[This act] echoed the traditions of liberal reform in the north-east (of Ireland) dating back to the nineteenth century. Like developments in Britain, such reforms demonstrated a commitment on the part of the local authorities to a movement towards positive improvements in healthcare.¹²

The Poor Law system was ended in 1948 with the establishment of the NHS and welfare state. However, Workhouse buildings continued to be utilised in new roles and under new institutional names: frequently as hospitals.



Belfast Workhouse (circa 1964), showing the original Workhouse building which formed part of the Belfast City Hospital, photo supplied by Deputy Keeper of the Records, PRONI, HOS/4/1/10/4

3.0 Unmarried girls and women entering Workhouses

Unmarried pregnant women and girls frequented Workhouses from their establishment in the nineteenth century, as a place to give birth and access medical care in a society that was often 'intolerant of unmarried mothers'.¹³ The Workhouse authorities in the nineteenth century were concerned about the presence of 'unmarried mothers' in these institutions because they were viewed as 'immoral and their children a drain on the rates': a view which continued into the twentieth century.¹⁴ The stigma attached to 'illegitimacy' also had an incremental element, as is seen by the fact that the Workhouse authorities categorised single women who had more than one child alongside sex workers and placed them in segregated accommodation that was separate from other 'inmates'.¹⁵

Following a visit to the Belfast Workhouse by a petty sessions magistrate in 1879, the magistrate commented on the 'large number of illegitimate children that had been born in the house; [and] that he found numbers of young girls, sixteen and seventeen years of age, who were about to become mothers, all unmarried'.¹⁶ He further commented on single women with more than one 'illegitimate' child: 'They are kept entirely separate, and have no intercourse with the other inmates, not even in the general dining hall, as their meals are all supplied to them in their own building.'¹⁷ This was 'a building at the rear of the workhouse grounds...enclosed by a high wall' and this was where 'all unfortunate women and women having two or more illegitimate children are placed'.¹⁸



Belfast Workhouse (circa 1964), with Separation Ward to the left, photo supplied by Deputy Keeper of the Records, PRONI, HOS/4/1/10/12

The Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland in 1906 held the 'definite opinion' that the Workhouse was an unfit place for the mothers of 'illegitimate' children.¹⁹ It was also particularly concerned with the mixing of different types of 'unmarried mothers', differentiating between those with one child and those who had two or more. It was believed that not enforcing this difference would cause the women to 'lose a sense of shame and become more degraded'.²⁰ In addition, evidence given to the Commission by Dr Darling, Co Armagh suggested that 'unmarried mothers' with more than one child were mentally deficient, being labelled as 'imbeciles' and 'hopeless cases'.²¹ In England and Wales, although not NI (following Partition), this type of thinking had serious and harmful consequences for women labelled in this discriminatory way. The Mental Deficiency Act 1913 enabled local authorities to 'certify and institutionalise, generally unmarried, pregnant women who were deemed "defective"'. It was a 'mental defect' that was 'believed to have caused the women's "immorality"'. Moreover, destitute women in Workhouses 'were more likely to suffer this fate'.²²

The stigma attached to pregnancy outside of marriage was recognised by the 1906 Commission.



...when a girl falls from virtue she is rarely able, in Ireland to return to her home, owing to the sentiment of aversion from immorality which is too strong in most parts of the country to permit her to face that feeling and to return with her baby to her relatives, even if they would receive her.²³

They recommended that 'girls' 'on occasion of their first lapse' should be sent to special institutions, operated either by philanthropic or religious organisations or Boards of Guardians, to try and ensure that the life of the 'girl would not be wrecked owing to her fall'. For those considered 'more depraved', which included those with more than one child outside of marriage, it was recommended they should be sent to institutions such as those run by the Good Shepherd Sisters (GSS) or other organisations.²⁴ While the suggestions of the report were not implemented, it does highlight how the 'unmarried mother' was depicted at the time, the lack of understanding of their circumstances and how gendered moral judgements were made.²⁵

While it has been argued that the Poor Law in Ireland at least offered a 'safety net' for the single mother that had not existed before, the discussion above indicates the limited nature of that net.²⁶ There were contemporary concerns from socially conservative voices that the Workhouses encouraged illegitimacy by offering this limited form of support.²⁷ In Ulster Workhouses in 1859, the percentage of 'illegitimate' children was higher than other provinces; it has been suggested that this may have indicated that there was a 'higher rate of pre-marital sex in Ulster counties' or that there was 'possibly even less support for single mothers within local communities'.²⁸

Considering the Belfast Workhouse, it has been argued that an analysis of the indoor registers 'provides striking evidence of the economic and social precarity of poor single mothers, and the importance of the workhouse for some of them as a last resort'.²⁹ In the early twentieth century, 'large numbers of young single women either with children

or in various stages of pregnancy' were admitted to the Workhouse. They were 'deemed "immoral" and ostracised by family and community', and the Workhouse 'represented one very important option as a source of shelter, healthcare and food' for these women. Moreover, women may have chosen the Workhouse rather than other religious or philanthropic institutions to avoid their 'overtly religious ethos or their attempts to exert moral control'.³⁰

4.0 Admissions to Workhouses in NI

With the establishment of the Northern Irish state, there were discussions on what should be done with the Workhouses. These discussions centred on the retention of the institutions, and who would be admitted. The Report of the Departmental Commission on Local Government Administration in Northern Ireland was presented to the recently established NI government on 13 October 1927 and focused on the future of Northern Irish Workhouses. The main recommendation of the Commission was the abolition of Boards of Guardians, instead advocating for Workhouse services to be reorganised on a county-by-county basis with the establishment of county homes. With reference to 'unmarried mothers', it suggested that first-time mothers were to be boarded out 'before and after confinement in philanthropic institutions' or in county homes. If, following childbirth, a mother wanted to obtain work but could not support the child, the Public Assistance Committee could either keep the child or offer some financial support for boarding out. For girls and women who were about to give birth to their second or subsequent 'illegitimate' baby, it was suggested that they be maintained in a county home as an 'ordinary pauper' and moved to the maternity ward of the district hospital to give birth.³¹ Further, Public Assistance Committees were to be given the authority to bring women who were 'feeble-minded' or 'of vicious habits or mode of life while her children are being maintained by the committee' to petty court sessions to detain them.³²

The suggestions by the Commission were similar to measures that were already in operation in the Irish Free State. There, Workhouses were closed and replaced by county and district hospitals as well as county homes for those who required institutional care. Ten institutions were set up specifically for 'unmarried mothers' funded by local authorities, all of which were run by religious orders.³³ County homes continued to be used by unmarried pregnant women and girls, who often 'had to carry out onerous and unpleasant work for which they were not paid'.³⁴ It has been demonstrated that a class dimension existed whereby poorer women and girls went to county homes, and more middle-class women and girls went to mother and baby institutions.³⁵

The Report of the Departmental Commission on Local Government Administration in Northern Ireland and its recommendations were not introduced in NI, but they do indicate the thinking around 'unmarried mothers'. Similarly, the Ballymena Board of Guardians put forward a proposal in 1923 on how 'unmarried mothers' should be 'handled'. It suggested that if the mother was 'depraved and immoral' the child should be taken from her and boarded out, and she should be 'detained in the workhouse and put to work'.³⁶ In Limavady, Miss Robertson, a member of the Board of Guardians, put forward a similar motion in 1924 that 'workhouses should be abolished...All children should be boarded out...There should be a home for vagrants and unmarried mothers in each county, who should be put to suitable work, so as to make them self-supporting'.³⁷

There was also a concern in Belfast about pregnant women and girls who were travelling from their own hometown or village seeking admission to the Workhouse to give birth in its infirmary. As discussed in the chapter in this report on Baby Institutions, there was particular concern over an address in Dock Street that a number of women and girls from outside Belfast used as their address to gain admittance into the Workhouse to give birth. In 1930 Mrs Coleman, a member of the Belfast Board of Guardians, advocated for guardians to be 'given legislative power either to refuse admittance to expectant unmarried mothers [not from the district of the Workhouse they entered] and send them back to towns from which they came, or to detain them in the institution for a period of five years'.³⁸ She gave supporting statistics to make her dramatic and, to say the very least, unsympathetic point. Of the 18 births that occurred in the Belfast Workhouse, recorded in the previous quarterly report, eight were girls or women who were not originally from Belfast; for the Malone Place Rescue and Maternity Home, seven of the twelve registered births were to mothers from the country; three of the six in Townsend Street Maternity Hospital were from outside Belfast; and one out of the three births recorded in Thorndale House was not originally from Belfast.³⁹

For many women and girls, going to a Workhouse, hospital or mother and baby institution outside of their local area would have afforded additional privacy, particularly if families were not aware of the situation or were unsupportive. In addition, distance allowed protection of a family's respectability and could hide the situation of a pregnancy outside of marriage and the associated stigma and shame.

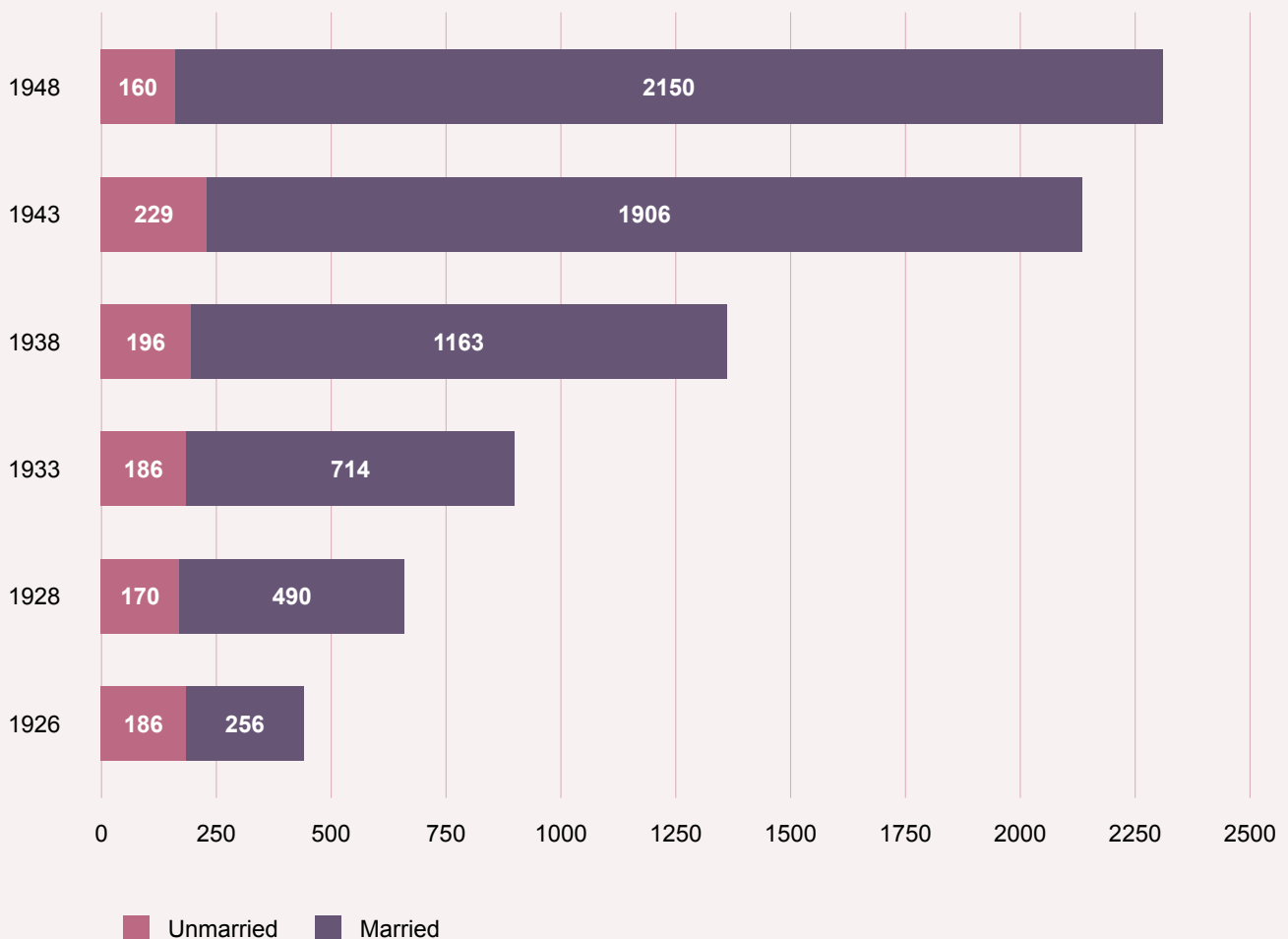
Further concerns about women with more than one child outside of marriage were raised by the Committee on the Protection and Welfare of the Young and the Treatment of Young Offenders (Lynn Committee) in its 1938 report. It stated that 'women with one or more children make the workhouse their home and by reason of being useful workers are not encouraged to leave'.⁴⁰ They were also concerned about women 'often of a low mentality' who 'return to the workhouse every year or two to bring another illegitimate child into the world'. The Committee conjectured that these children 'of such mothers will probably swell the number of juvenile offenders in the future' and recommended that the Parliament of NI should pass a Mental Deficiency Act – like those in operation in England, Wales and Scotland – as this would allow 'a judicial authority to deal with some of the worst of these cases'.⁴¹

The Lynn Committee also discussed how it was difficult for some fostered and boarded-out children to secure employment in later years when they had to produce birth certificates that revealed their 'illegitimate' birth. The Committee recommended issuing a 'certificate for these children which would indicate merely the name and age without disclosing the illegitimacy'.⁴² This recommendation does appear to have been taken on board. A letter sent from the Ministry of Home Affairs to all Boards of Guardians in NI in 1943 stated that the use of the term 'Union Hospital' or 'Workhouse Hospital' for place of birth on a child's birth certificate 'may be detrimental to the child in later life applying for posts of employment...[it] cannot be doubted that the use of the terms...may cause an undeniable stigma to attach to the person'. It suggested using the ordinary form of address for the hospital: for example, the Jubilee Maternity Home for Belfast.⁴³

5.0 Girls and women who gave birth in Workhouses

The Belfast Workhouse, as the largest Workhouse in NI, was examined by the Panel to assess the numbers of women and girls who gave birth there. Across the period 1922–48, married women and girls outnumbered unmarried girls and women who used the Belfast Workhouse Maternity Hospital (Ivy Cottage).⁴⁴ The number of births to married and unmarried women and girls for a sample of years between 1926 and 1948 is shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Number of births at Belfast Maternity Hospital, 1926–48



The Belfast Board of Guardians closed Ivy Cottage, opening the Jubilee Maternity Hospital in 1935. The number of births annually increased, reaching 1,359 births in 1938. Of these, 1,163 (85.6%) were to married mothers and 196 (14.4%) were to mothers not married. In 1943, 229 (10.7%) of the 2,135 births were to ‘unmarried mothers’ and in 1948, of the 2,310 births, 160 (6.9%) were to mothers who were not married.⁴⁵

However, when these figures are compared to the total number of births that occurred within and outside marriage, the reliance on Workhouse maternity services by mothers who were not married becomes clear. In 1926, the 186 births in the Belfast Workhouse

to mothers who were not married made up 57% of all 'illegitimate' births in Belfast County Borough; in contrast only 3% of all 'legitimate' births occurred in the Workhouse that year.⁴⁶ In 1928, 50% of all births to unmarried girls and women took place in the Workhouse compared with 5% of births to married women.⁴⁷ While the percentage of births outside marriage occurring in the Workhouse began to decline from 1930 onwards – accounting for 45% of all out-of-wedlock births by 1933, compared to 9% of births to married women – this does still indicate the reliance of a large proportion of mothers who were not married on the Workhouse system.

Further statistics were compiled for 1928 and 1938 for how long married and unmarried women stayed in the Workhouse on either side of giving birth. In 1928, 31% of married women remained more than 14 days in the Workhouse compared with 61% of those who were not married. In 1938, the figures were similar, with 29% of married women remaining over 14 days and 65% of unmarried women staying more than 14 days. This further indicates the reliance that unmarried women had on the Workhouse, remaining there longer than their married counterparts, suggesting a lack of support networks and accommodation to return to after giving birth.

Two other Workhouses where birth records were available were also examined for 1928, 1933, 1938 and 1943: Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh and Coleraine, Co Londonderry. The numbers of births in these institutions were considerably smaller than in Belfast, but the figures also showed a clear pattern of use of these Workhouses by mothers who were not married, as **Table 1** indicates.

Table 1: Proportion of births to unmarried girls and women in Coleraine and Enniskillen Workhouses

	1928	1933	1938	1943
Coleraine	40%	62%	58%	53%
Enniskillen	79%	55%	56%	43%

6.0 Financial maintenance for children in the Workhouse

Prior to 1925, girls and women who gave birth outside marriage could not pursue a legal case to get financial maintenance from the fathers of their children in their own right. Such cases came under the Bastardy (Ireland) Act 1863, where the Board of Guardians could seek maintenance from putative fathers (the term for the man identified as a baby's father) when the mother and her child were in the Workhouse.

Issues with this system of maintenance had been recognised from the beginning of the twentieth century. Mr William Rodden, at a meeting of the Irish Workhouse Association in 1901, brought attention to the fact that 'there was no legal power which could be used by these mothers to compel such men to discharge this duty'.⁴⁸ After demonstrating that 'at least 75% of the unmarried mothers, who, with their children, obtained relief in the [Belfast Workhouse] during the period stated [between 1900 and 1901], were either

domestic servants or girls employed in public works such as warehouses and mills', Rodden argued that 'surely girls in that station of life should have some cheap and simple mode of proceeding against those who had wronged them'.⁴⁹

The success of maintenance claims handled by the Belfast Board of Guardians prior to 1925 was limited. Of 185 'illegitimate' births to Belfast girls and women between 1920 and 1921 in the Workhouse, only 14 maintenance cases were brought against fathers, with only two successful cases.⁵⁰ Between 1921 and 1923, success rates were higher, with 11 successful claims out of 23 cases.⁵¹ Issues with the legislation were recognised with James Graham Leslie, a member of the Northern Irish Senate, contending that 'spasmodic efforts were made to put the [Bastardy] Act [1863] in force...but the results were not encouraging, and the putative father almost invariably escaped liability as regards his child'.⁵² This was likely because firstly, the mother had to swear under oath who the father of her child was, and secondly, she had to have supporting evidence for maintenance to be awarded.⁵³ This meant disclosing private and personal information into a public arena that girls, women and their families may not have wished to make known. Moreover, finding supporting evidence of paternity could be very difficult.

The Northern Irish government introduced the Illegitimate Children (Affiliation Orders) Act (Northern Ireland) in 1924, which came into effect from 1925. This legislation allowed mothers of 'illegitimate' children, for the first time, to bring a maintenance case against putative fathers. Such legislation was deemed by James Graham Leslie in 1925 'a genuine and determined endeavour to grapple with some at least of those practical difficulties which are the result of illicit procreation'.⁵⁴ There were, however, clearly contradictory views held regarding 'unmarried mothers', which were evident in the debates in the NI Parliament around the legislation. Dr Hugh Morrison, the MP for Queen's University of Belfast, who was a keen advocate of the legislation, described 'unmarried mothers' as 'innocent, helpless, possibly emotional girls'.⁵⁵

However, as Dehra Chichester, the MP for Londonderry in the NI Parliament stated during the same debate, sympathy for the 'seduced innocents' was not universal.

“

...what we sow we must reap. It is the mother who reaps in shame, sorrow, anguish and suffering...it is not for the woman I am making an appeal; it is for the child.

The debates also reflected the class issues surrounding 'unmarried mothers', with considerable discussion of the threat to men of blackmail from 'unscrupulous and immoral women'.⁵⁶ This was a debate that certainly revealed the inability for those in political power to understand the real impact of the stigma society imposed on 'unmarried mothers' as opposed to notional threats to male reputations.

7.0 The boarding out and nursing out of children

Boarding out or being nursed out was the process by which the Board of Guardians sent children to foster parents rather than having them admitted to an institution. While children of married and unmarried parents could be boarded out, it was 'predominately illegitimate children who, due to economic necessity and the shame of illegitimacy, needed to be kept for a number of months or years by someone other than a relative'.⁵⁷ In 1862, the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act allowed for the boarding out of children up to five years old (this was extended to 16 for a boy and 18 for a girl in 1898). Under the Children Act 1908, nurse mothers were required to register a child with the local authorities within 48 hours of the boy or girl entering or being removed from their home. It also included regulations on the inspection of 'nurse children', the responsibility for which lay with the local authorities. This was extended in the Children (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) in 1931, where foster parents had to obtain the written permission of the Board of Guardians before taking in a child to foster for financial reward.⁵⁸

The Ministry of Home Affairs took over the administration of local government services in NI and had on its staff a 'Lady Inspector of Boarded-out children'.⁵⁹ In addition, relieving officers were appointed by Boards of Guardians to visit the homes of foster parents monthly and report back. Belfast had two relieving officers employed full time by the 1930s.⁶⁰ These two officers had a large number of children 'at nurse' to visit, with numbers averaging around 1,000 in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶¹

The History Sheet Committee of the Belfast Board of Guardians reported on children in the Workhouse and children boarded out and nursed out across Belfast. In 1927, the Committee reported that 'the daily average number of Healthy Children aged 5 to 13 years [in the Workhouse] is now 61, against 43 a year ago, and those under 5 years is now 56 against 34'.⁶² In the same report it was concluded that the Committee was having 'good results' in boarding out 'boys and girls in country homes'.⁶³

The Ministry of Home Affairs believed it was important that children should be removed 'from the distressing and demoralising influence of the Workhouses', and in 1925 a Cabinet memorandum expressed the opinion that there was 'hardly one child in a workhouse not capable of being boarded out'. It believed that the 'poor children of today have now every chance of growing up into healthy citizens, as contrasted with the old arrangements under which the poor children were brought up in the Workhouses and were imbued with Workhouse ideas to their physical and moral detriment'.⁶⁴ Similarly, the Lynn Committee report in 1938 concluded 'that a workhouse is far from being a suitable place to bring up children'.⁶⁵

There were, however, concerns that boarding out and nursing out was abused and around the level of unregulated activity relating to the care of children that took place. The History Sheet Committee raised concerns about the practices around 'unmarried mothers' who were not from Belfast, but giving birth in Belfast and then leaving their children.

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...there are forces at work in Belfast making a regular system of receiving young expectant mothers from all parts of the Country and then after assisting them by admission to Nursing Homes or this Maternity Hospital – take charge of the child shortly after birth and the mother’s duties so far as the child is concerned being nil can depart wherever she likes.⁶⁶

Concern was also raised about babies in Belfast being placed ‘at nurse’ and then becoming untraceable. During a meeting of the Board of Guardians on 1 January 1929, the case of an infant going ‘missing’ was discussed. A woman had registered herself as taking a child to nurse for reward and received £2 monthly. The child had been born in the Workhouse maternity ward and was removed the following day; the baby’s mother remained in the Workhouse.⁶⁷ Following a visit by Inspector Nicholl, it was found ‘that no person with a baby’ was at this address, and that no occupant in this street or the next street over knew anything about this woman.⁶⁸ The case was brought to the attention of the Police Authority, and Mr Torrens (an inspector under the Children Act) made ‘exhaustive enquiries’ but ‘could find no trace of’ the woman.⁶⁹

There were other cases of women found nursing a child for reward who were not registered as required by law. The law had been passed so that children’s movements could be tracked in order to ensure their safety. The potential dangers to a child of the system being ignored are illustrated by one example from 1929 when a woman who was unregistered informed the inspector that she had received a baby ‘from a woman at the Midland Railway Station [but] she could not give the woman’s name or address and she does not know the parents’.⁷⁰

Notes relating to the debates on the Children (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 1931 recorded some of the abuses of the system that had been uncovered. A ‘Mrs X informed the Children’s Inspector she could give no information regarding the child she was keeping except that it had been given to her by some man unknown to her who had given her 20s [20 shillings, which was £1]’. This was not an isolated example, as another case showed.

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...a child born in the Workhouse who was taken out by its grandmother and placed in a certain home. It was given out of the home to a woman to nurse, the woman’s name being given as AB. On inquiry, no person of this name could be traced and the whereabouts of the child remain unknown, although the police took the matter up.⁷¹

The concerns behind these reports involved the term ‘baby farming’, which was often used to apply to fostering, boarding-out or nursing-out agreements. The term had risen to public attention due to a small number of nineteenth-century incidents where women were convicted of murdering the young children under their ‘care’, the deaths being either from violence or extreme neglect. A total of eight women were executed in the most high-profile cases.⁷² This led to the term ‘baby farmer’ becoming inextricably linked with child

abuse.⁷³ It was largely due to high-profile and the most tragic cases that the Children Act 1908 and the Children (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 1931 included measures to monitor various pathways through which children were placed in family homes.

When the NI Senate debated this new legislation in 1931, Mr Joseph Cunningham spoke out against the trafficking of children and ‘baby farming’.

“

[The practice is] carried on to a shameful extent, especially in Belfast. It is true there were quite a number of cases of children brought into the city and handed over to other persons, and the fact of the matter is they are lost to everybody. The suffering that must be entailed to these infants is terrible.⁷⁴

In his view, the restrictions placed on single mothers by the Board of Guardians contributed to this problem, and he argued that they should take responsibility for the care of children in these circumstances.

“

There is an innocent girl – or, at any rate, a girl who has unintentionally made a slip – and she has to earn a living for herself. How is she possibly to make a new start in life if she has to carry out with her the evidence of her offence? The girl has no other option but to dispose of the child as early as possible to any person who can be got to take it off her hands [...] If they [Board of Guardians] would only keep the child and give the girl an opportunity of trying to walk straight and of making a living for herself, I believe there would be less of this.⁷⁵

In 1938, the Lynn Committee also raised concerns about the payment for children ‘at nurse’, based on examples brought to its attention where someone who had been refused permission to take a child had ‘subsequently been discovered in charge of a child for whom it is alleged no payment of any kind is being made’. The Committee concluded that there seemed to be a ‘general practice’ in some areas to evade notifying the Board of Guardians by saying there was no payment being made, when, in reality, there was. The Lynn Committee recommended that notification with the Board of Guardians be compulsory in all cases where children were put out ‘to nurse, whether for reward or not’. It also recommended involving the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children in the inspection of foster-children’s homes.⁷⁶

In 1945, fears were again expressed that the system was being abused. A memorandum from an inspector from the Ministry of Home Affairs explained the concern that some children who ‘should be visited are not known to the authorities as the foster parents and their mothers are becoming increasingly aware of how easy it is to evade the law’. The inspector went on to explain that she had been told that ‘during the past six months over 40 illegitimate births have been registered in the Omagh Union and of these only four have been registered as nurse children’. The inspector outlined the procedure.

“

[It is] becoming a regular practice for a mother to enter into an agreement drawn up in a solicitor's office with a foster mother. It is then claimed that the child is adopted and not subject to the regulations, registration and inspection. No mention of any money payment is made and if inquiries are made it is denied that any reward has been received but in the course of time it sometimes transpires that money has passed hands. No legal action can be taken against the parties to such an agreement should they succeed in keeping it secret for 6 months as this is not a continuing offence.

The inspector said this ensured that the child 'has thus neither the advantage of supervision as a registered child, nor the legal advantages of an adopted child'. She also raised one of the issues that had always been a feature of boarding out, the fear of proselytisation, the idea that children would be converted to a religion different from the one they were born into.

“

...in Londonderry, Strabane and Limavady I have had reports of mothers being approached by members of a different church with offers to take their children off their hands. Owing to the difficulty in finding homes within the capacity of these mothers to pay or any home where the children could be suitably cared for, it is understandable such offers should be accepted as the alternative is frequently a prolonged stay in the Workhouse.⁷⁷

The other question which was raised at the Ministry of Home Affairs relating to children 'at nurse' was whether a foster mother, after she had unofficially agreed with a parent to nurse a child for payment, could refuse responsibility for the child 'should the payment cease or should the child prove difficult and force it on the Guardians'. They explained their concern.

“

...mothers from across the Border, some of whom come here to have their children and then leave them at nurse, finally [cease] any payment and also others who are working here prior to confinement, then place the child at nurse and later clear out.⁷⁸

The official response from the Ministry was that undertaking to nurse a child for reward did not 'place the acceptor in loco parentis [in place of a parent] to the child and make him responsible for its maintenance'. The inspector said 'that in view of this decision, I fear the Board of Guardians, as soon as it becomes generally known, will have some unpleasant surprises'.⁷⁹

The Poor Law was abolished in NI with the introduction of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948. Boarding out and nursing for reward, however, remained in place. The powers of Boards of Guardians were transferred to welfare authorities under the Public Health and Local Government (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 1947.

Table 2 shows the number of children boarded out in that year.

Table 2: Children boarded out by Poor Law Guardians as of 28 June 1947⁸⁰

Union	Boarded out	Nursed for reward	In Workhouses (no. as of 28 June 1947)		
			With mothers	Without mothers	Total
Antrim	9	10	—	—	—
Armagh	23	29	10	7	17
Ballycastle	2	8	—	—	—
Ballymena	3	19	—	—	—
Ballymoney	3	15	—	—	—
Banbridge	—	10	—	—	—
Belfast	33	590	16	46	62
Castlederg	5	8	—	—	—
Clogher	4	12	—	—	—
Coleraine	—	19	13	11	24
Cookstown	7	10	—	—	—
Downpatrick	4	32	—	—	—
Dungannon	19	19	4	6	10
Enniskillen	28	48	9	1	10
Irvinestown	9	15	—	—	—
Kilkeel	10	9	—	—	—
Larne	1	31	—	—	—
Limavady	6	9	—	—	—
Lisburn	19	21	—	—	—
Lisnaskea	7	10	—	—	—
Londonderry	8	7	1	1	2
Lurgan	2	18	—	—	—
Magherafelt	6	12	—	—	—
Newry	35	37	16	11	27
Newtownards	17	55	—	—	—
Omagh	29	15	—	—	—
Strabane	19	41	—	—	—
Totals	308	1,109	69	83	152

After 1948, there was considerable discussion by the various county welfare committees about who was responsible for children boarded out in their jurisdiction but born elsewhere. As one of the aims of boarding out was to remove children from cities to rural areas, when investigating cases in his area in 1948, the welfare officer for Co Down discovered that 61 boarded-out children were from Belfast as opposed to 53 from Co Down.⁸¹ Annoyance about paying maintenance fees for children from outside the locality was a common sentiment within health and welfare financial discussions in NI, particularly during the years in which the new welfare state structures were implemented after the closure of the last Workhouses.⁸²

There were also continued difficulties in finding suitable foster parents. For example, in 1958 a Ministry of Home Affairs Children's Inspector explained to the Antrim County Welfare Committee that, 'in our previous attempts to obtain foster homes we have had little or no success from advertisements placed in the press'.⁸³ The Proceedings of the Child Welfare Council reported the increases in boarding-out allowances made available to foster parents. By 1954 they were as follows: £2, 13 shillings and 4 pence (£75 in 2026) per month for children up to 5 years old; £2, 15 shillings and 4 pence for 5- to 8-year-olds; £3, 2 shillings and 0 pence for 9- to 13-year-olds; and £3, 3 shillings and 0 pence (£85 in 2026) for those over 13. The report for that year noted that the number of children 'nursed for reward' had gone up from 102 children in 1949 to 124 in 1954.⁸⁴

The inspections of boarding-out applicants became the responsibility of local authorities from the early 1950s, following the closure of the Workhouses. In a number of cases, the babies involved arrived either from a mother and baby institution or via another of the voluntary institutions. This produced a complicated process with the inspectors having to go back to the institution involved to discuss the baby's situation and if there was an issue with the living conditions. In one instance, in 1952, a baby was fostered from Thorndale House but the report described the foster mother as 'really too old for this job' and that she was 'making a great fuss over maintenance' and 'threatening to return the baby' to Thorndale. The inspector detailed the voluntary agencies involved as well as the welfare authorities.⁸⁵

The situation could also be complicated by religious differences as in the experience of a family who had fostered a baby from Mater Dei Hostel. They wanted to adopt the baby, who was Catholic, although they were Protestant. The baby's birth mother was prepared to let the baby be adopted, but the inspector observed that 'the Roman Catholic Church will hardly allow this! Present position is most unfair [to the foster mother]'. The child was subsequently returned to Mater Dei by the welfare workers 'where the mother is with her second baby'.⁸⁶

8.0 The transition from Workhouses to welfare hostels

By 1947 conditions in remaining Workhouses were often very poor. An inspection of Enniskillen Workhouse in 1947 found the nursery to be 'very untidy and far from clean'. There were 11 'old feeble women' who required bed nursing, and the only people to look after them were 'young inmate girls (unmarried expectant mothers)'. The report concluded 'the conditions generally in the Enniskillen Workhouse are bad' with 'all the work...being done by inmate labour'.⁸⁷

Some of the Workhouses, including Belfast and Coleraine, became welfare hostels after 1948 and continued to be maintained by welfare authorities. In Belfast they continued to house 'illegitimate and orphaned children, unmarried mothers, prostitutes, mentally handicapped and elderly' until other suitable accommodation was found.⁸⁸

The Londonderry County Welfare, Children's Sub-Committee Minutes for November 1948 discussed a letter from the Medical Officer of Health, who recommended the removal from the Coleraine Welfare Hostel 'of present occupants to properly equipped homes'. This coincided with an inspection report of the hostel that said conditions were 'most unsatisfactory; all children were suffering from impetigo...and [there were] four cases of Scarlet Fever'. This led the sub-committee to make urgent representation to the Child Welfare Council for a new children's home. In December 1948, the sub-committee minutes recorded their unhappiness that children were still being maintained in the county hostel.⁸⁹

They also expressed their concern, in 1953, about what they described as 'single women of subnormal intelligence with illegitimate children' who find that 'they are again pregnant [and then] seek accommodation in the County Hostel when their parents or relatives refuse to allow them to continue residing with them'. The sub-committee explained its objections.

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...many of these women are quite able bodied and are not in need of care and attention that cannot be given to them in their own family's homes. The County Hostel does not provide suitable accommodation for this type.

They believed that 'this kind of case' would benefit from admittance 'at the Committee's charge to one of the moral welfare homes, even if it means sending women to Belfast'. This was presumably a reference to either the Thorndale Industrial Home or the GSS St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Belfast. It was, they believed, 'the incorrigible cases of women who have had several children' who were the 'greatest difficulty' and that it was 'often only when a third illegitimate child is born that the authorities accept the woman of a mentally deficient type as suitable for admission to a Special Care Home'.⁹⁰

9.0 The role of Workhouses in adoption

The Board of Guardians also facilitated adoptions, following the introduction of the Adoption of Children Act (Northern Ireland) 1929, and could make the decision to begin an adoption process if it was found that the mother was not 'a fit person' or the child had been 'deserted'. An example in this category involved a woman who, in 1947, was unemployed and had been in the Belfast Workhouse infirmary receiving treatment for venereal disease. Her six-month-old baby was transferred to the Workhouse Nursery Department and recommended for adoption as the 'mother is not a fit person to have control'.⁹¹

The Panel received several testimonies from individuals who were adopted after their birth mother had given birth to them in one of NI's Workhouses. Their lived experience and their decision to share it enriches our ability to assess the role of the Workhouses in family separations prior to 1948.

20250516BN was born in the 1940s in the maternity ward of the Newry Workhouse, or the 'Newry Union' as it is stated on her admission record to St Joseph's Babies' Home, Belfast where she was taken from Newry. Later on, aged just over two and a half, she was moved to a children's institution. When 20250516BN eventually contacted her birth mother, she discovered that her understanding was that her daughter had been adopted. Following the birth, 20250516BN's birth mother had emigrated to North America.

Her birth mother believed an adoption had taken place because she had provided a priest with a sum of £25 to arrange an adoption. This money was what was known at the time as the 'adoption premium' and was often made by the birth mother or her family to pay for any legal fees associated with an adoption as well as the financial costs faced by an adoptive family in providing for the needs of the child. Advertisements in newspapers to make readers aware that a baby was available for adoption often included the notification that a premium was available. For example, in 1929 the *Newry Reporter* small advertisement column featured this short notice: 'Would kind person adopt Baby Girl, 8 months old; R.C. Small premium given. Apply Box 1772.'⁹²

20250516BN's birth mother was aged 19 when she entered the Newry Workhouse. She was one of many young women who had travelled from her home in a rural part of the Irish Free State during World War Two to seek work in NI. Having given the 'adoption premium' money to a priest 20250516BN explained, 'my mother firmly believed I had been put up for adoption, as she had provided the premium fee to [name of priest] for my admission to St Joseph's Baby Home'.

When seeking clarification from a social worker about why she was not adopted, it was suggested to 20250516BN that her birth mother 'may never have signed the final adoption papers, leaving my status uncertain'. She has learnt that when her birth mother discovered what had happened she 'never fully accepted or came to terms with my placement in Nazareth House, rather than a formal adoption'. 20250516BN described to the Panel the effects of such uncertainty.



[This] discrepancy between intended adoption and institutional placement shaped my early years, leaving lingering questions about my mother's expectations and the decisions made on my behalf...

This account highlights the uncertainty and financial transactions that often shaped adoption and institutional care during that time.

In his testimony, Alan Bigger, who waived his right to anonymity, shared what he knows about his birth in the Belfast Workhouse in 1948. His narrative is a little unusual because his birth mother was a married woman who already had several children. She had an affair with and became pregnant by her lover. The couple then fraudulently cashed a

stolen cheque, ran away from the village in which they lived and took up rented rooms in Belfast. Soon after this Alan was born in the Belfast Workhouse.

Like many adopted children, now adults, Alan has a great deal of uncertainty about his early life. In most cases, there are at least some sketchy details in institutional or social service files. However, for Alan there is nothing, and he has no knowledge of where he was for the first two years of his life. He speculates that he might have been 'nursed out' or placed in a Barnardo's institution (although he has traced no records for that).



It may be that I'd been, was mothered out, which I understand that there had been a reference to the fact that I may have been in a home in Ballycastle in Northern Ireland [a reference to a Barnardo's institution], but we have no documentation to that. So, I've lost two and a half years of my life.

He does know that in 1950 he was taken over the border to Dublin by his birth mother's father. He was placed in Miss Carr's Children's Home and was there for five months. From there he was adopted by the Biggers, who also adopted a baby girl from Scotland. Alan speculated on the networks that might have been involved in his cross-border adoption. His birth family were members of the Church of Ireland, but he suspects there was what he calls a Gospel Hall connection to his adoption. He has identified a Belfast woman, a former missionary to Egypt, as active in this process. He has pieced together information from an exhaustive and lengthy period of contacting various adoption agencies and institutions.

Alan explained that his birth mother's husband's name is on his original birth certificate, rather than his actual birth father's name. He speculated that there was a plan to enable the married couple to claim family allowance or some other form of benefits for him. He also has a birth certificate which incorrectly records his place of birth as the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and under his adopted family's surname.

20250501BW was born in the Armagh Workhouse in the 1940s. Her birth mother was admitted there after she became pregnant and her father reacted with great anger to the news. 20250501BW reunited with her birth mother many decades later.



She said her father, never spoke to her again. Even though like she got married and had a family and would have brought the children back to [visit].

The birth father also offered no hope of support and, indeed, never acknowledged that he was 20250501BW's father.

After 20250501BW was born, a local priest arranged for a couple to adopt her. This priest also arranged a job for her birth mother in a location that was some distance away. 20250501BW told the Panel that she was happy with her adoptive parents but

was unaware that she had been adopted until she found her adoption papers after the death of her adoptive father in the 1960s. Over the following years, she gradually began to learn more about the process. When her adoptive mother died, when she was five, she believes that her birth mother may have returned to ask for the return of her daughter but that this was refused by her adoptive father. She also learnt that her birth mother visited her when she was very young, but that these visits stopped when her birth mother married. Her birth mother then had other children. The participant has met these siblings, who did not know of her existence until after their mother's death. 20250501BW explained that this was down to the shame that had never left her birth mother and which she witnessed on the two occasions that she met with her. The shame and shunning by her father in particular never left her.

“

Maybe, the first [meeting] would have been maybe, an hour, now as I say she was terribly upset I spent my time trying to calm her down. You know? But, it would have been maybe an hour, well over an hour. And, the second one was shorter. Again, she was embarrassed. She was ashamed. She didn't want to sit no, you know, she didn't want to and that was it. It happened and she, it's a shame it never left her. It was surely. And I mean the [several] daughters were very, they felt sorry that she couldn't tell them [about the existence of their elder sister].

Ashley Brook, who waived his right to anonymity, shared testimony about his grandmother, who had told him about experiences from her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s when she lived in a small town in Co Tyrone. She revealed to him that she was raped by her stepfather and that her mother was also subjected to this man's horrific abuse. Ashley's grandmother told him twice she escaped the family home and ran to the parish priest to beg for help. She related to Ashley that the response she received was, 'Child, stop making up lies and go home.'

When she approached the parochial house on a third occasion, a neighbour overheard the commotion and insisted to the priest that something was done to intervene. The response was to send her to the Belfast Workhouse. Ashley visited PRONI and discovered that there is an entry for her. She was 13 years old when first admitted, and there was a second entry for her entering when she was 15. In the context of the rapes by her stepfather, Ashley suspects that these admissions were related to pregnancies and told the Panel that this was too much for his grandmother to share with him.

“

She was understandably crying and very upset when she was remembering what had happened to her. She guessed that she was around 12–13 years of age at the time. She kept trying to tell me something else but kept stopping herself. Now that I am an adult and knowing what I know now about Workhouses and Laundries, I strongly believe that she was sent there because she was pregnant, or there was a possibility that she was pregnant.

Patsy Dunne, who waived her right to anonymity, told the Panel that her birth mother gave birth to her in the Belfast Workhouse in the 1940s. Patsy explained that she had nine birth siblings, all of whom either were adopted or were placed in social care. Although Patsy asked her parents about this, they did not share the details about her adoption until she got married at the age of 24.

Eventually, Patsy had her own children, which prompted her search for information about her birth family. After doing some of her own searching, Patsy reached out to social services, but the records held 'were so poor', including those relating to her time spent in Nazareth House, Fahan, Co Donegal, where she was placed prior to her adoption. This meant that although her birth siblings had begun searching for their birth family, it was difficult for them to find Patsy.

By the time she met her siblings, Patsy was able to find out some information about her birth mother, who in her teens joined the British military. During her time in the military, she met an older, married man and went on to become pregnant with his children at regular intervals. Sadly, her birth mother struggled to parent the children past infancy and arranged for them to be sent to children's institutions. Patsy's understanding is that at least four of her siblings shared the same birth father, but she cannot be sure. She has been led to believe that her birth mother was facing a prison sentence at the time that she signed the consent for Patsy's adoption.

Muriel Nelson is the oldest person to share testimony with the Panel. She waived her right to anonymity. Muriel told the Panel that she was born in 1924 and spoke about her lived experience of Lisnaskea Workhouse. Her daughter supported Muriel during this process.

Muriel was taken as a baby to the Workhouse with her mother after she was thrown off the family farm by her brother. Muriel's mother had three children outside marriage by the age of 28 and they all went to the Workhouse with her. Muriel remained there until she was 15 years old. She reflected on the fact that the Workhouse was her mother's only option.

“

I often try and picture it. That she was going to head for the Workhouse for that was the only place that girls like her could stay or visit. There was nowhere else for you. And she had another sister who left home and didn't want to know anything about Mother after this happened to her and married somebody...I didn't picture in my mind what she did when she got to Lisnaskea. But she must have headed for the Workhouse because when we were there for so long, we saw so many girls, young girls come in, walk in, hardly able to walk because they were admitted.

Muriel told the Panel that each day her mother woke at 5am and was responsible for cooking the porridge for the whole Workhouse. Muriel recalls being mistreated, such as being physically punished if she jumped over the wall to leave the Workhouse. This included getting her hair pulled. She was the longest 'resident' in the Workhouse.

Muriel explained that people could ‘escape’ the Workhouse if they managed to get some money together or if their families came to help them. In the case of children, she recalled the sort of fostering, boarding-out or nursing-out arrangements that were discussed earlier in the chapter. She also recalled that adoptions or being sent out to work, if they were old enough, were other pathways for children. Muriel explained that this could be done through adverts in the newspaper.

“

...if you were Catholic you advertised your baby in the *Fermanagh Herald*, and if you were Protestant the advert went in the *Impartial Reporter*...to say, ‘Boy or girl, such and such an age and all the rest, wanted for adoption...’ Their only way of escape out of the workhouse was to put an advert in the paper...and then if people were interested [they might say]: ‘There’s a wee girl or wee boy, 12, he’d be very useful on the farm.’

In response to such advertisements ‘people came on a Thursday to pick children’. Muriel told the Panel that mothers ‘wanted this so their kids could get out’. In this case ‘out’ meant from the Workhouse and, the mother probably hoped, from poverty.

In terms of access to any additional money, Muriel’s uncle sent ‘money from England which paid for clothes and a holiday in Bundoran’, after which they had to return to the Workhouse.

Muriel also remembered the pregnant single girls and women who arrived at the Workhouse and how they were treated.

“

You could be there and they could be expecting their baby tonight, pains in the stomach and all, and every Saturday morning they would say, there was a big, big dining room, as big as a hayshed that you’d see now. And they still had to go down, in threes often, on their knees and a bag or sack for an apron, nothing to kneel on, and that was scrubbed every morning, every Saturday morning, no matter how you felt. You got the abuse and then, and all the names that they called them when they came to the front door.

She recalled the Workhouse matron was verbally abusive to the pregnant single girls and women.

“

She was an old tyrant. She had no family, and she would call you all bitches and names, ‘You’re a trollop’, when you come to the door, ‘Don’t tell me it’s you come out this time of night and me in bed and you expecting a baby.’

She put this in the wider context of the community’s discrimination towards them simply for the fact of being pregnant.

“

Though they were only girls, from farmer's daughters and things and they were nearly put out of their houses because they became pregnant. And they had to go to work...And they'd talk about you, you know, the locals...You'd have been, if they saw you were pregnant, they wouldn't have bothered asking you, even. Because you'd have to go, they wouldn't have you and the baby in the house. No.

Muriel described the Workhouse 'inmates' being dressed 'in old skirts and blouses that people had worn many a time and...and old shoes, boots, or whatever fitted you'. The mothers 'got a pint of milk a day, I think it was, towards feeding your baby'.

The Workhouse 'inmates' were expected to attend chapel on Sundays, and got Sunday clothes for attending, supplied by guardians. Muriel recalls eating from rusty dishes but if an inspection visit was due they were made to polish the dishes with wire wool.

Muriel went to school every day. She brought her lunch with her, which she remembers as two slices of white bread, butter and jam. She was ashamed about being from the Workhouse and was worried that her friends would tell their parents who she was. She was often referred to as a pauper. Muriel remembers that some of the families were very nice to her and would get them dresses and shoes. She was worried about joining in with clubs at school because she wouldn't be able to attend classes. Muriel could not go out to play after school. She does remember going to Bundoran for the day on a Sunday school trip. It cost 14 shillings and the participant did not know how her mother had managed to save up for it.

When asked about fruits and vegetables and food with vitamins, Muriel describes the soup at the Workhouse, which was made of bacon and cabbage and onions, and sometimes champ. At Easter they would get two eggs for breakfast.

Muriel's siblings were among the children who left the Workhouse separately from their mother. Her sister (G) was fostered out and had a deeply unhappy placement. Her brother was ten years old and sent out to work as cheap labour on a farm. Her mother did not want them to be adopted. When she heard that Muriel's sister was in a bad foster placement, she walked from Lisnaskea to Fivemiletown in an attempt to bring her back. Her foster family were not sending her to school and were treating her cruelly. However, Muriel recalled that there was no investigation of her complaints by the Board of Guardians and no one checked on her sister's wellbeing.

“

[They] didn't send her to school. That's right. They had a family of their own. And she was made to do all the donkey work. No time for education or anything else. Nobody ever investigated as to how they were doing in school or anything else.

Muriel's brother fared better although he was still treated unequally: 'they were quite good to him. He had to work hard. Harder than their sons would.'

Muriel spoke in detail about being a Workhouse ‘resident’, and that it was considered a disgrace to be pregnant and unmarried. The family eventually left the Workhouse during World War Two when it was requisitioned for army troops. Her mother managed to pay for a tiny rental property. It had a tin roof, no running water and rough stone floors, but Muriel remembers thinking ‘it was a palace we were going into’.

Two further people shared their testimony in 2019 for the QUB and UU report. QB explained that her mother was born in a hospital in the 1940s and was then transferred, along with her own mother, to the Workhouse. QB’s mother was later sent to a children’s institution and never saw her mother again. QB has discovered that her grandmother died in the 1990s in RoI. When she contacted some of her grandmother’s family, they explained that due to her status as a single pregnant woman, her immediate family played a role in shaming her and forcing her into the Workhouse. QB learnt that it was only after the death of QB’s aunt (her grandmother’s sister) that her grandmother was ever mentioned. Before that point, if her name was brought up in conversation ‘the aunt would ignore whoever asked and would freeze up’. One family member had been able to discover that QB’s grandmother ‘was marched or stoned out of her home and walked to Derry Workhouse and [was] told never to return’.

CO, who lives in England, shared what she knew about her mother’s personal experience of one of NI’s Workhouses. CO’s mother was admitted to this Workhouse in the 1940s and gave birth to a daughter who was then adopted. It was only when this daughter began to search for her mother that CO learnt about this part of her mother’s life.

CO does not know a great deal about the details of the adoption. By the time that her older sister contacted the family hoping to meet their mother, CO’s mother was elderly and suffering from dementia. This meant that it was impossible to ask her about these traumatic events in her early life. CO remarked that ‘if you were pregnant and single that was not a good idea’ in the 1940s. She explained her reasoning.

“

...apart from the fact unmarried mothers were regarded as no better than criminals and prostitutes at the time – and also judged as mentally unstable – there wouldn’t have been many places for her to go. She was living in [town redacted] at the time and she did have a sister there, so you’d have hoped that she would have taken her in. But apparently not. But I’m reluctant to judge on that because I don’t know what the situation was. And I think that sister had lost a baby herself through an accident, so she may not have been in any fit state of mind.

CO’s comment about the potential for her mother to be judged as ‘mentally unstable’ demonstrates her knowledge of some of the issues discussed earlier in this chapter, which explained how ‘unmarried mothers’ in the Workhouse faced the risk of being detained under the Mental Deficiency Act 1913. While legislation did not apply to NI, discussion cited above (from the early 1950s) indicated that in some cases ‘unmarried mothers’ were detained as ‘special care’ cases.

CO's mother was 19 when she entered the Workhouse. Her conversations with an experienced social worker have led CO to suspect that her mother's own parents were unaware of this first pregnancy. The same social worker suggested that CO's mother could have been provided with assistance in migrating to England after the birth. CO was aware this form of exile from family and friends may well have been preferable to one alternative, which was potentially being sent to one of the GSS St Mary's institutions to work in its laundry. There were some links between Workhouse 'inmates' and the GSS laundries. The first women to enter the Magdalene laundry opened by the GSS in Newry were former 'inmates' of Newry Workhouse.⁹³

Once she became aware of her mother's time in the Workhouse, CO was able to make more sense of some of the apparently confused things that her mother sometimes said. She occasionally said: 'Don't leave me in the poorhouse on my own.' She has also made references to 'screaming with the pain' in the Workhouse, which CO assumed 'was a reference to childbirth [because] I'm not sure they gave them painkillers'. Her mother has also said: 'They put me in with the lunatics. I'm not mad.' CO speculates that her mother was placed in the 'lunatic ward'. Two other things CO's mother has said are: 'It nearly destroyed me'; and finally, 'I didn't want to give it up' – a reference, CO assumes, to the baby girl.

CO has discovered that two days after her birth, the girl was baptised at the local Catholic chapel. She has also viewed the adoption documents.



[I] could see that my mum had signed away her parental rights the same month that she gave birth, and that a Catholic priest was involved in the process and acted as *guardian ad litem* for the adoptive parents.

CO notes that they 'were doing it all legally, I suppose. Because often it was done informally, I think, wasn't it, the adoption?' The adoption appears to have been the type of third-party adoption – usually arranged by GPs, priests or a minister of religion – that are mentioned in several other testimonies featured in this report. There is no record of the underlying reason for the adoption and CO's assessment on this was: 'I think she probably had no money, or she wouldn't have been in the workhouse if she'd had any money.' A further significant factor that CO suggested was that if her mother was in the 'lunatic ward', agreeing to the adoption might have been something that she felt would enable her to leave the Workhouse as soon as possible. Certainly, as this chapter makes clear, even by the 1940s the Workhouses were very grim institutions.

10.0 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the role of Workhouses and the part they played in providing a maternity service to 'unmarried mothers'. The statistics cited here indicate that a very large proportion of births to single unmarried girls and women took place in the Workhouse (as high as 50% of all births to unmarried girls and women) when compared

with births to married women (as low as 5% of the total births to married women). As in other aspects of their role Workhouses were associated with stigma and shame in the context of 'unmarried mothers', as is revealed by both some of the more callous speeches of local politicians cited here from the 1920s and in the testimonies used in this chapter.

There are a relatively small number of testimonies on the Workhouses, which is not surprising given their closure date was 1948. However, the testimonies that have been cited here, including one from the oldest person to share testimony with the Panel (a 101-year-old), have added a good deal of depth to our understanding of how these institutions were experienced by 'unmarried mothers' and their children as well as their role in overseeing family separations on behalf of the state.

The Board of Guardians that managed each Workhouse were also responsible for the separation of mothers from their babies and young children. This was carried out via a variety of arrangements: fostering out, boarding out, nursing out and adoption.

The Board of Guardians' records reveal the use of Workhouses for maternity services by 'unmarried mothers'. They also offer some insights into how many of their babies were then nursed or boarded out through the Workhouse authorities. It is evident that the process of boarding out could be problematic. It is unclear how detailed the inspection process of families and homes was and what level of oversight there was for babies once they were placed in this way. Examples highlighted above indicate that there was the potential for babies to disappear from the supervisory view of the state or for boarded-out children to be exploited by the families with whom they were placed. As the testimonies cited here indicate, individuals and their families are still living with the consequences of these actions (or inaction) even after the passing of a considerable period of time.

Endnotes

Chapter 1 - The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institutions and Laundries: The Background

- ¹ Mairead Enright, "'Haunting reform': Older women, English Good Shepherds institutions and the Children's Act (1948)", *Contemporary British History* 39, no. 2 (2025), 182.
- ² 'History', GSS, accessed 10 September 2025, <https://goodshepherdsisters.ie/about/history/>.
- ³ Peter E. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness: A Sociological Study of the Good Shepherd Convent Refuges for the Social Reformation and Christian Conversion of Prostitutes and Convicted Women in Nineteenth Century Britain' (PhD thesis, Brunel University, 1985), 3.
- ⁴ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 76–77.
- ⁵ 'Contemplative Sisters 196 years in formation', Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, accessed 17 November 2026, <https://sistersofthegoodshepherd.com/contemplative-sisters-196-years-in-formation/>.
- ⁶ Napier Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries Research Report: Representations Process Response Template (2020).
- ⁷ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 85–86.
- ⁸ Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.
- ⁹ Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 22. For the Order's own outline of its history see the GSS website, accessed 17 October 2025, <https://goodshepherdsisters.ie/about/history/>.
- ¹⁰ Enright, "'Haunting reform'", 184.
- ¹¹ For the background to these historical developments see, for example, Paula Bartley, *Prostitution, Prevention and Reform in England, 1860–1914* (2012); Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*.
- ¹² Mary Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters: Women with Learning Difficulties Living in Convent Homes* (2002), 18.
- ¹³ Linda Mahood, 'The Magdalene's friend: prostitution and social control in Glasgow, 1869–1890', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13, 1–2 (1990), 49–61.
- ¹⁴ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 5.
- ¹⁵ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 240.
- ¹⁶ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 76–77.
- ¹⁷ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 259.
- ¹⁸ V.M. Crawford, 'Philanthropy and wage paying', *The Economic Journal* 11, no. 41 (1901).
- ¹⁹ Crawford, 'Philanthropy and wage paying', 101.
- ²⁰ Brigid Harrison, 'Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries, 1895–1907: Campaigning for a Catholic exception', *Irish Historical Studies* 45, no. 168 (2021), 229; Factory and Workshop Act 1895, Section 22(3).
- ²¹ Harrison, 'Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries', 229; Factory and Workshop Act 1895, Section 22(3).
- ²² *Freemans Journal*, 7 May 1895.
- ²³ Harrison, 'Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries', 233.
- ²⁴ Hansard, House of Commons Debates 4 (13 August 1901) xcix, col. 675.
- ²⁵ Hansard 4 (11 June 1901) xcv, col. 113.
- ²⁶ Harrison, 'Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries', 235.
- ²⁷ Harrison, 'Factory and workshop legislation and convent laundries', 237.
- ²⁸ Desmond Greer and James M. Nicolson, *The Factory Acts in Ireland, 1802–1914* (2003), 293.
- ²⁹ Correspondence Frank Kerr Solicitors to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, March–April 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ³⁰ Frank Kerr Solicitors to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, 18 April 1944.
- ³¹ Myra Curtis, *Report of the Care of Children's Committee* Cmnd 6922 (HMSO, 1946), quoted in Enright, "'Haunting reform'", 193.
- ³² Laundry: Correspondence from the Home Office regarding wages paid to girls engaged on laundry work in children's homes, TNA LAB11/2165, quoted in Enright, "'Haunting reform'", footnote 74.
- ³³ Modern Records Centre, Warwick University: Trade Board, Note upon the position of certain Convent Laundries under the Trade Board, 22 December 1921.
- ³⁴ Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness', 270–72.
- ³⁵ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- ³⁶ The Seeböhm Report was the name applied to the report by the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, which was published in 1968. Its recommendations became relevant in NI following the end of devolution in 1972 when the British government closed the Stormont Assembly and began a period of direct rule.
- ³⁷ These examples appear in the St Mary's, Belfast admissions register for 1935 and 1936.
- ³⁸ *Irish Examiner*, 1 November 2017.
- ³⁹ 'Committee against torture considers report of Ireland,' United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 28 July 2017, accessed 16 November 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21923&LangID=E>.
- ⁴⁰ *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement in the Magdalene Laundries* (Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 2013).

- 41 Sisters of the Good Shepherd, *Practical Rules for the Use of the Religious of the Good Shepherd for the Direction of the Classes* (1898).
- 42 HIAI, Chapter 21, Module 12, Opening Statement on behalf of the Good Shepherd Sisters, 6.14. The report was published as *Report of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (The Executive Office, 2017)*.
- 43 HIAI, Chapter 21, Module 12, Closing Submission on behalf of Good Shepherd Sisters, Columns 10–12.
- 44 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 136.
- 45 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 155.
- 46 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 21, Column 156.
- 47 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 28.
- 48 Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce Survey of Laundries, 1942, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), COM/35/16.
- 49 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 28, 131–32.
- 50 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Columns 120–23, 150.
- 51 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 65.
- 52 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 103.
- 53 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 138.
- 54 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 147.
- 55 Enright, “Haunting reform”, 189.
- 56 Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters*, 51.
- 57 Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters*, 52.
- 58 Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters*, 57.
- 59 Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters*, 59.
- 60 Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters*, 64.
- 61 ‘Transition period in St Mary’s Residential Home following closure of Laundry’ (nd. c.1983). Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- 62 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group, 12 February 1992, Eastern Health and Social Services Board Registration and Inspection Unit. Records provided by the GSS, January 2026.
- 63 ‘Putting the past in context, embracing the present era, nurturing the charism in the future’, Belfast 2002. Records provided by the GSS, January 2026.
- 64 Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81.
- 65 *Ulster Examiner and Northern Star*, 13 February 1869.
- 66 *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 21 December 1893.
- 67 Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, 84.
- 68 Maria Luddy, ‘Prostitution and rescue work in nineteenth century Ireland,’ in *Ireland’s Women: Writings Past and Present*, eds. A. Norman and B. Kennelly (1994), 76–77.
- 69 Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish*, 98.
- 70 *Northern Whig*, 4 December 1886.
- 71 *Ulster Examiner and Northern Star*, 25 November 1874.
- 72 *Ulster Examiner and Northern Star*, 13 February 1877.
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- 74 *Belfast Morning News*, 25 May 1880.
- 75 *Belfast Morning News*, 19 January 1882.
- 76 An organisation formed in 1856, it was a national association consisting of managers and workers in preventive and reformatory institutions, having as its object ‘the reclamation and elevation of the neglected and criminal classes’. *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 April 1899.
- 77 *Northern Whig*, 1 June 1899.
- 78 *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 June 1899.
- 79 *Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner*, 25 December 1920.
- 80 *Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner*, 10 and 24 April 1920.
- 81 *Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner*, 11 July 1910. This sum is the approximate equivalent of £860,000 today.
- 82 Lyndsey Earner-Byrne and Olwen Purdue, “‘Please pardon me for taking the liberty’: Poverty letters as negotiating spaces in 1920s and 1930s Belfast and Dublin”, *Cultural and Social History* 19, no. 5 (2022), 570.
- 83 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Column 28.
- 84 Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce Survey of Laundries, 1942, PRONI, COM/35/16.
- 85 Laundry and cleaning services: survey of facilities available and used by armed services, 1943–1945, PRONI, COM 35/16.
- 86 Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- 87 Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce Survey of Laundries, 1942, PRONI, COM/35/16.
- 88 Laundry services: minutes of the meeting of the advisory panel (1942–43), PRONI, COM/35/18.
- 89 *Protestant Telegraph*, 18 June 1966.
- 90 See Leanne McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality: Women in Twentieth-century Northern Ireland* (2013).
- 91 Brian Fulton and Trevor Parkhill, *Making the Difference: An Oral History of Probation in Northern Ireland* (2009), 13.
- 92 Fulton and Parkhill, *Making the Difference*, 8.
- 93 HIAI, Module 12, GSC-377: Witness statement of Sister Ethna McDermott RGS, 11 January 2016: 6.10.2. This material was previously available on the website connected with the HIAI’s work but it is no longer on that site.

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- ⁹⁵ HIAI, Chapter 21, Visitation Report, Good Shepherd, Irish Province, March 1980, Footnotes, 111. This material was previously available on the website connected with the HIAI's work but it is no longer on that site.
- ⁹⁶ *Derry Journal*, 6 October 1919.
- ⁹⁷ Leanne McCormick and Sean O'Connell (with Olivia Dee and John Privilege), *Mother and Baby Homes and Madgalene Laundries in Northern Ireland 1922–1990* (Department of Health, 2021).
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- ⁹⁹ Submissions to HIAI, GSC-5492, 2.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Derry Journal*, 5 May 1948.
- ¹⁰¹ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 25 October 1923.
- ¹⁰² *Derry Journal*, 26 October 1923.
- ¹⁰³ *Derry Journal*, 3 February 1926.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Derry Journal*, 26 July 1926.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Derry Journal*, 23 June 1926.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 26 July 1926.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Derry Journal*, 6 February 1929.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Derry Journal*, 20 February 1930.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Derry Journal*, 10 February 1932.
- ¹¹⁰ *Derry Journal*, 29 May 1962.
- ¹¹¹ *Derry Journal*, 11 June 1963.
- ¹¹² *Ulster Herald*, 22 November 1975.
- ¹¹³ *Ulster Herald*, 20 October 1984.
- ¹¹⁴ *Derry Journal*, 13 January 1976; 12 December 1980; 1 December 1987.
- ¹¹⁵ *Derry Journal*, 10 November 1987.
- ¹¹⁶ *Derry Journal*, 30 May 1980.
- ¹¹⁷ *Derry Journal*, 30 August 1968.
- ¹¹⁸ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- ¹¹⁹ *Derry Journal*, 9 June 1982.
- ¹²⁰ *Ulster Herald*, 27 November 1982.
- ¹²¹ *Derry Journal*, 7 November 1984.
- ¹²² *Derry Journal*, 20 April 1999.
- ¹²³ Source withheld as it identifies some of the women and uses their photographs.
- ¹²⁴ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 151.
- ¹²⁵ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 88.
- ¹²⁶ *Irish Independent*, 24 April 1984.
- ¹²⁷ HIAI report, Module 12, GSC-377: Witness statement of Sister Ethna McDermott RGS, citing the memory of two Sisters approached by her in advance of the statement, 11 January 2016, 6.5.

Chapter 2 - The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Belfast

- ¹ Although the Sacred Heart Home was a location with the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast that accommodated school age girls, its record books include details on those admitted to the St Mary's institution or working in the laundry.
- ² *Report of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry* (The Executive Office, 2017).
- ³ Leanne McCormick and Sean O'Connell (with Olivia Dee and John Privilege), *Mother and Baby Homes and Madgalene Laundries in Northern Ireland 1922–1990* (Department of Health, 2021).
- ⁴ Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 81.
- ⁵ HIAI report, Module 12, GSC-379, 2.1.3.
- ⁶ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Visitation Report, Good Shepherd, Irish Province, March 1980, footnotes, 11.
- ⁷ Internal Ministry of Home Affairs Memorandum (26 June 1952), Children's and Young Persons Act, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), HA/13/178.
- ⁸ The GSS supplied complete admissions records for St Mary's Belfast between 1922 and 1932 in February 2026. This did not leave the Panel with enough time to use them in all statistical analysis in this chapter. However, we do include them in **Figure 1**. An addendum at the conclusion of this chapter offers further analysis of this data.
- ⁹ 'Contemplative Sisters 196 years in formation', Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, accessed 15 October 2025, <https://sistersofthegoodshepherd.com/contemplative-sisters-196-years-in-formation/>.
- ¹⁰ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Mother and Baby Home and Magdalene Laundry Research Report: Representations Process Response Template (2020).
- ¹¹ Northern Ireland Ministry of Home Affairs, Voluntary Homes Registration, PRONI, HSS/34/6A.
- ¹² HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 62.
- ¹³ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 44.
- ¹⁴ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 23.

- 15 Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- 16 Statement no. 1. GSS – Preliminary and Generic Background Information, 4 April 2018.
- 17 Lyndsey Earner-Byrne and Olwen Purdue, “Please pardon me for taking the liberty”: Poverty letters as negotiating spaces in 1920s and 1930s Belfast and Dublin’, *Cultural and Social History* 19, no. 5 (2022): 570.
- 18 Mairead Enright, “Haunting reform”: Older women, English Good Shepherd institutions and the Children Act 1948’, in *Contemporary British History*, 39/2 (2025), 186.
- 19 That this was an area associated with sex workers is reinforced by an article in a local newspaper, ‘Flats women live in terror of night attacks’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 March 1968.
- 20 Brian Fulton and Trevor Parkhill, *Making the Difference: An Oral History of Probation in Northern Ireland* (Probation Service of Northern Ireland, 2009), 13.
- 21 Fulton and Parkhill, *Making the Difference*, 8; for more on the Salvation Army’s work see the chapter in this Report on Thorndale House Industrial Home.
- 22 Cardinal MacRory to Ministry of Home Affairs, 25 June 1944, Cardinal Ó Fiaich Library and Archives Armagh, Cardinal MacRory Archive, religious, Box 9, ‘B’ – relating to Convents.
- 23 Circular no. TC11/1951, 30 May 1951, CYPA Circulars on Training Schools and Borstals, PRONI, HA/13/184.
- 24 *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 October 1935.
- 25 *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 March 1960.
- 26 *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 March 1960.
- 27 *Belfast News-Letter*, 4 February 1939.
- 28 Registers Armagh Prison, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/2.
- 29 Registers Armagh Prison, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/3.
- 30 Registers Armagh Prison, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/3.
- 31 Registers Armagh Prison, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/3.
- 32 Interim orders were employed in cases where the court was yet to make a final decision on an individual girl or woman.
- 33 Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of state involvement with the Magdalene laundries, (Department of Home Affairs, Justice and Migration, 2013), Chapter 10. Full report available at Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries.
- 34 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group, 7 January 1993, Eastern Health and Social Services Board Registration and Inspection Unit. Records provided by GSS January 2026.
- 35 Statement no. 1. GSS – Preliminary and Generic Background Information, 4 April 2018.
- 36 HIAI report, Module 12, GSC-395, Witness statement of Sister Ethna McDermott RGS, citing the memory of two Sisters approached by her in advance of the statement, 11 January 2016, 6.9.2.
- 37 Sisters of the Good Shepherd, *Practical Rules for the Use of the Religious of the Good Shepherd for the Direction of the Classes* (GSS, 1898).
- 38 HIAI report, Module 12, Closing Submission on behalf of Good Shepherd Sisters, 22.
- 39 HIAI report, Module 12, Witness Statement of HIA211, 3.
- 40 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 136.
- 41 *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 December 1959.
- 42 *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 September 1964.
- 43 This may be a reference to Major James Chichester-Clark, who went on to become Prime Minister of NI in 1969. It is not clear what his involvement was in this case.
- 44 The Sisters of St Louis opened an industrial school and orphanage in Middletown, Co Armagh in 1881. In 1950 it became a training school for Catholic girls. It closed in 2000.
- 45 HIAI report, Chapter 18, Module 11, Column 40-41.
- 46 See Mary Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters: Women with Learning Difficulties Living in Convents* (British Institute of Learning Disabilities, 2003).
- 47 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group, 12 February 1992, Eastern Health and Social Services Board Registration and Inspection Unit.
- 48 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group.
- 49 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group, 7 January 1993.
- 50 Annual Announced Inspection, St Mary’s Senior Group, 12 February 1992.
- 51 Napiers solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- 52 Based on visit to Belfast City Cemetery and photographs taken on 13 June 2019.
- 53 Based on visit to Milltown Cemetery and photographs taken on 25 May 2019.
- 54 Napiers solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- 55 For work on the widespread Catholic practice of marking deaths via newspaper notices see Ciara Breathnach and David Butler, ‘Death notices and obituaries in provincial Irish newspapers, 1820–1900’, in *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain and Europe: Historical Perspectives*, eds. James Kelly and Mary Anne Lyons (Irish Academic Press, 2013), 252; see also Lindsey Prior, *The Social Organisation of Death* (Springer, 1987), 134, which discovered that only 34 of 415 deaths sampled for Belfast in 1981 were not marked by a death notice in a local newspaper.
- 56 We searched the *Irish News* across various dates between 1960 and 2000.
- 57 Napiers solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- 58 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 155.

Chapter 3 - The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Derry/Londonderry

- ¹ *Report of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry* (Executive Office, 2017).
- ² Leanne McCormick and Sean O'Connell (with Olivia Dee and John Privilege), *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990* (Department of Health, 2021).
- ³ Good Shepherd Sisters, GSIR 408 – 1920–1949 ledger, includes yearly income, expenditure and yearly totals.
- ⁴ Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce Survey of Laundries, 1942, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), COM/35/16.
- ⁵ *Derry Journal*, 15 March 1940.
- ⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 March 1959.
- ⁷ This is a room in church where a priest prepares for Mass.
- ⁸ No accounts were discovered for 1939.
- ⁹ HIAI evidence received for Module 12, Good Shepherd Closing Statement, Column 20. This was available on the website linked to the HIAI but is no longer online.
- ¹⁰ Laundry Trade Board, 'Note upon the position of certain Convent Laundries under the Trade Board', 22 December 1921, Modern Records Centre, Warwick University.
- ¹¹ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Mother and Baby Home and Magdalene Laundry Research Report: Representations Process Response Template (2020).
- ¹² Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce Survey of Laundries, 1942, PRONI, COM/35/16.
- ¹³ Minutes of the laundry service advisory panel, 1942–43, PRONI, COM35/18.
- ¹⁴ Ulster Launderers' Association to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, 11 February 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ¹⁵ Frank Kerr Solicitors to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, 16 March 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ¹⁶ Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry to Frank Kerr Solicitors, 22 March 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ¹⁷ Frank Kerr Solicitors to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, 23 March 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ¹⁸ Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry to Frank Kerr Solicitors, 14 April 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ¹⁹ Frank Kerr Solicitors to Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry, 18 April 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ²⁰ Rev. Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry to Frank Kerr Solicitors, 19 April 1944. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ²¹ Report of the Interdepartmental Committee to establish the state's involvement with the Magdalene Laundries (2013), Chapter 20, Summary of findings, accessed 8 November 2025, <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/collections/report-of-the-inter-departmental-committee-to-establish-the-facts-of-state-involvement-with-the-magdalen-laundries/#part-iii-state-involvement-with-the-magdalen-laundries>.
- ²² *Irish Examiner*, 1 November 2017.
- ²³ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Committee against torture considers report of Ireland', 28 July 2017, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/07/committee-against-torture-considers-report-ireland>.
- ²⁴ Interview with Reverend Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry with inspector WHSS, 9 July 1970. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ²⁵ Letter from Reverend Mother GSS Derry/Londonderry to Ministry of Commerce, 9 February 1966. Records provided by GSS, January 2026.
- ²⁶ Notes on Bellevue Hostel, GSS Derry/Londonderry, records provided by the GSS in January 2026.
- ²⁷ 'Transition period in St Mary's Residential Home Following Closure of Laundry', nd., records of GSS Derry/Londonderry.
- ²⁸ Peter E. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness: A Sociological Study of the Good Shepherd Convent Refuges for the Social Reformation and Christian Conversion of Prostitutes and Convicted Women in Nineteenth Century Britain' (PhD thesis, Brunel University, 1985), 76–77.
- ²⁹ Northern Ireland Ministry of Home Affairs, Voluntary Homes Registration, PRONI, HSS/34/6A.
- ³⁰ Report on Voluntary Homes, Kathleen B. Forrest, 28 April 1953, Welfare Authorities Homes and Voluntary Homes: Medical Inspection of Children, PRONI, HA/13/108.
- ³¹ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Column 117.
- ³² 'Social Analysis, the Good Shepherd Sisters, Waterside Derry, 1919-1987'; Evaluation of the Apostolate of the Sisters in the light of the Gospel and of our Charism, 1986-1987. Records provided by the GSS in January 2026.
- ³³ Social Analysis, the Good Shepherd Sisters, Waterside Derry, 1919-1987'. Records provided by the GSS in January 2026.
- ³⁴ Social Analysis, the Good Shepherd Sisters, Waterside Derry, 1919-1987'. Records provided by the GSS in January 2026.
- ³⁵ Inspection Report, Bellevue Hostel, Good Shepherd Convent, Londonderry, Social Work Advisory Group, DHSS, 1981. Records provided by the GSS in January 2026.
- ³⁶ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 127.

- ³⁷ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 155.
- ³⁸ HIAI report, Module 12, Good Shepherd Sisters, written closing submissions on behalf of the Good Shepherd Sisters, 29 March 2016, Column 5.7.
- ³⁹ Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2021), 'Chapter 29: Stranorlar county home', <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/chapter-29-stranorlar-county-home.pdf>.
- ⁴⁰ Mary Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters: Women with Learning Difficulties Living in Convent Homes* (British Institute of Learning Disabilities, 2002), 10–11.
- ⁴¹ HIAI report, Module 12, Good Shepherd Sisters, written closing submissions on behalf of the Good Shepherd Sisters, Column 5.7. See the chapter on St Mary's, Belfast for testimony from DL, who observed nighttime arrivals of Royal Ulster Constabulary officers with girls and women.
- ⁴² HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 132.
- ⁴³ Submissions to HIAI, GSC-5492, 2.
- ⁴⁴ *Derry Journal*, 2 September 1957.
- ⁴⁵ For an explanation of the role of hiring fairs in Ireland see Ciara Breathnach and Sarah-Anne Buckley, 'Rural youth, season labour, and family income: Ireland 1890–1935', *Journal of Childhood and Youth* 13, no. 1 (2020).
- ⁴⁶ *Derry Journal*, 5 May 1948.
- ⁴⁷ Paternalistic means taking decisions about other people's lives rather than letting them decide for themselves.
- ⁴⁸ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 15 January 1924.
- ⁴⁹ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 18 February 1932.
- ⁵⁰ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 23 February 1950.
- ⁵¹ The crime of killing a child under one year old.
- ⁵² *Londonderry Sentinel*, 18 March 1926.
- ⁵³ *Derry Journal*, 22 January 1934.
- ⁵⁴ *Londonderry Sentinel*, 20 February 1934.
- ⁵⁵ *Derry Journal*, 10 September 1948.
- ⁵⁶ Interview Reverend Mother, GSC Derry/Londonderry, and Inspector WHSS, 9 July 1970. Records provided by GSS. January 2026.
- ⁵⁷ Submissions to HIAI, Module 12, GSC-542, Column 2. This was formerly available on the Executive Office website dealing with the HIAI but it is no longer available.
- ⁵⁸ HIAI Module 12, evidence from the GSS, Columns 7.6.2–7.6.4. No longer available online.
- ⁵⁹ HIAI Module 12 evidence on GSS, GSC-555. No longer available online.
- ⁶⁰ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 136.
- ⁶¹ Submissions to HIAI, GSC-542, 2.
- ⁶² Types of machinery used in a commercial laundry.
- ⁶³ HIAI report, Module 12, witness statement of HIA211, 1.
- ⁶⁴ As examples of the meaning of these new names, Camillus was a youth employed in religious service; Perpetua was a third-century AD, martyred saint.
- ⁶⁵ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, column 26.
- ⁶⁶ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA211, column 1. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but is no longer available online.
- ⁶⁷ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA107, column 3. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but is no longer online.
- ⁶⁸ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 126.
- ⁶⁹ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 132.
- ⁷⁰ The name by which the Report of the Committee on Local Authority Personal Social Services became known.
- ⁷¹ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA107, column 4. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but it is no longer online.
- ⁷² HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 133.
- ⁷³ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA202, column 4. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but it is no longer online.
- ⁷⁴ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA211, column 4. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but it is no longer online.
- ⁷⁵ HIAI report, Module 12, witness statement of HIA107, 5.
- ⁷⁶ Sisters of the Good Shepherd, *Practical Rules for the Use of the Religious of the Good Shepherd for the Direction of the Classes* (GAA, 1898).
- ⁷⁷ HIAI evidence, Module 12, closing submission on behalf of the Good Shepherd Sisters, Column 22. This was available on the Executive Office website for the HIAI but it is no longer available.
- ⁷⁸ HIAI evidence, Module 12, witness statement of HIA211, column 3. This was formerly available at the Executive Office website for the HIAI.
- ⁷⁹ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 136.
- ⁸⁰ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 147.
- ⁸¹ We are not providing details of that publication to protect their privacy, as they were named in the article.
- ⁸² Department of Health research project, Mother and Baby Homes, Statement No. 1 – Good Shepherd Sisters – Preliminary and Generic Background Information, September 2020.
- ⁸³ GSS to Interdepartmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries, September 2020.

- ⁸⁴ Testimony of 20250207ZZ.
- ⁸⁵ Ciara Breathnach and David Butler, 'Death notices and obituaries in provincial Irish newspapers, 1820–1900', in *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain and Europe: Historical Perspectives*, eds. James Kelly and Mary Anne Lyons (Irish Academic Press, 2013), 252; see also Lindsey Prior, *The Social Organisation of Death* (Springer, 1987), 134, which discovered only 34 of 415 deaths sampled for Belfast in 1981 were not marked by a death notice in a local newspaper.
- ⁸⁶ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).
- ⁸⁷ Her age at death is based upon her age when she was admitted to St Mary's in July 1926.
- ⁸⁸ Left 1926 and readmitted in February 1952 and subsequently died on a date not recorded.
- ⁸⁹ Admitted to hospital April 1933 and subsequently died on a date not recorded.
- ⁹⁰ Admitted and discharged on a number of occasions, before her last admittance in 1952. She is noted as having died subsequently, but no date was recorded. There is a woman of the same name interred in Ardmore in 1993, which is likely the same woman.
- ⁹¹ HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 34.
- ⁹² HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 155.

Chapter 4 - The Good Shepherd Sisters St Mary's Institution and Laundry, Newry

- ¹ *Report of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry* (The Executive Office, 2017).
- ² Leanne McCormick and Sean O'Connell (with Olivia Dee and John Privilege), *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland 1922–1990* (Department of Health, 2021).
- ³ *Strabane Chronicle*, 25 February 1956; *Fermanagh Herald*, 29 June 1957.
- ⁴ The Seeböhm Report was the name applied to the report by the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, which was published in 1968. Its recommendations became relevant in NI following the end of devolution in 1972 when the British government closed the Stormont Assembly and began a period of direct rule.
- ⁵ Miss M. Wright, memorandum, Marianvale: Children's and Young Persons Act, 19 June 1958, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), HA/13/202.
- ⁶ Miss 2, inspection report, 28 June 1973, PRONI, HSS/34/14.
- ⁷ K.B. Forrest, inspection report, 16 February 1951, PRONI, HA/13/108.
- ⁸ Joe Napier Solicitors on behalf of the GSS to Leanne McCormick, 4 April 2018, Statement No 1 – Good Shepherd Sisters – Preliminary and Background Generic Information.
- ⁹ The registers for Marianville suggest that more than two women were sent from there to St Mary's, Newry to work in its laundry. However, they may not have been recorded in the Newry records.
- ¹⁰ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, *A Better Future: 50 Years of Child Care in Northern Ireland*, (2003), 7–8.
- ¹¹ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, *A Better Future*, 6.
- ¹² Mairead Enright, 'Haunting reform: Older women, English Good Shepherd institutions and the Children's Act 1948', *Contemporary British History* 39, no. 2 (2025): 186. The term 'voluntary' is widely used in social work and implies the absence of funding.
- ¹³ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries Research Project: Representations Process Response Template (2020).
- ¹⁴ The Special Care Committee was created following the Mental Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1948. Unlike in England, NI created one committee that was responsible for the mental health needs of those deemed 'mentally subnormal'. The Special Care Committee oversaw their care in both community and hospital contexts. See B.G. Scally and D.N. Mackay, 'The Special Care Service in Northern Ireland: Origins and structure', *Irish Journal of Medical Science* 39, no. 6 (1964).
- ¹⁵ Scally and Mackay, 'The Special Care Service in Northern Ireland'.
- ¹⁶ They had read the GSS' comments on this woman when they were included in McCormick et al, *Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland*, 287.
- ¹⁷ Source redacted to protect the privacy of the individual concerned.
- ¹⁸ HIAI report, witness statement of HIA202, 1.
- ¹⁹ Marianvale correspondence, 1968.
- ²⁰ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries Research Project: Representations Process Response Template (2020).
- ²¹ Interview with Probation Officer 1, 2 and 3, conducted during research for the QUB and UU report, 2021.
- ²² Brendan Fulton and Trevor Parkhill, *Making the Difference: An Oral History of Probation in Northern Ireland* (Probation Service of Northern Ireland, 2009), 45.
- ²³ Pamela Cox, *Gender, Justice and Welfare in Britain 1900–1950* (Palgrave, 2003), 15.
- ²⁴ Source redacted to protect the privacy of the individual concerned.
- ²⁵ Source redacted to protect the privacy of the individual concerned.
- ²⁶ HIAI Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 95.
- ²⁷ Miss M. Wright, memorandum, 19 June 1958, PRONI, HA/13/202.
- ²⁸ Miss 2, inspection report, 28 June 1973, PRONI, HSS/34/14.
- ²⁹ Napiers Solicitors on behalf of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (2020).

- 30 Miss 1, memorandum on Marianvale, Good Shepherd Newry, 10 February 1976, PRONI, HSS/34/14.
- 31 Statement no. 1, GSS – Preliminary and Generic Background Information, 4 April 2018. Provided by the GSS to the Interdepartmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries.
- 32 *Tenko* was a BBC TV drama series about women in a Japanese prison camp during World War Two. It was broadcast between 1981 and 1985.
- 33 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 103.
- 34 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 103.
- 35 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 138.
- 36 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 104.
- 37 HIAI report, Module 12, witness statement of HIA359, 5.
- 38 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 69.
- 39 HIAI report, Module 12, witness statement of HIA359, 2, 6.
- 40 Evidence provided to HIAI Module 12, witness statement of HIA202, column 4. This was available on the Executive Office website dealing with the HIAI but is no longer available.
- 41 Evidence provided to HIAI report by GSS as part of Module 12. This was previously available on the Executive Office website dealing with the HIAI but is no longer available.
- 42 HIAI Module 12 evidence GSC-461, 6.6. Also no longer available online.
- 43 HIAI Module 12 evidence GSC-464, witness statement of Sister Ethna McDermott RGS, 11 January 2016, 6.11. Also no longer available online.
- 44 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 147.
- 45 Statement no. 1. GSS – Preliminary and Generic Background Information, 4 April 2018.
- 46 Statement no. 1. GSS – Preliminary and Generic Background Information.
- 47 For more on Donnybrook see Mark Coen, Katherine O'Donnell and Maeve O'Rourke, *A Dublin Magdalene Laundry: Donnybrook and Church-State Power in Ireland* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).
- 48 It was the investigations into exhumations at High Park by Mary Rafferty published in 2003 which drew public attention to the discrepancies in exhumation applications. For more on this see 'Justice for Magdalenes Research', accessed 10 September 2025, <http://ifmresearch.com/home/preserving-magdalene-history/high-park/>.
- 49 GSS St Mary's, Newry, notes and correspondence.
- 50 HIAI, Module 12, witness statement of HIA202, 3.
- 51 Details of article withheld to protect the identity of the woman.
- 52 Provided to the QUB and UU researchers in May 2019.
- 53 Find a Grave, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/>.
- 54 Visit to cemetery to photograph grave, 23 September 2018.
- 55 Interview with Sister 1; St Mary's, Newry, register.
- 56 Interview with Priest 2 carried out for the QUB and UU report in 2019.
- 57 Interview with Priest 2.
- 58 This woman was said to have died in Dublin in 1990. No death registration could be identified in RoI around that year. A possible death registration was found for a woman in 1992 in Dungannon, which partially matched on the date of birth and other particulars, but despite this it was felt that it was unlikely to be relevant.
- 59 HIAI report, Chapter 21, Module 12, Column 155.

Chapter 5 - Thorndale Industrial Home

- 1 See the Truth Recovery Independent Panel website for information about access to records on this institution. www.independentpanel.truthrecoveryni.co.uk
- 2 Peter E. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness: A Sociological Study of the Good Shepherd Convent Refuges for the Social Reformation and Christian Conversion of Prostitutes and Convicted Women in Nineteenth Century Britain' (PhD thesis, Brunel University, 1985), 3.
- 3 Andrew Mark Eason, *Women in God's Army: Gender and Equality in the Early Salvation Army* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003), 137.
- 4 Eason, *Women in God's Army*, 137–38.
- 5 Diane Winston, *Red-hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army* (1999), 157.
- 6 *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 March 1911.
- 7 'A New Kind of Help': Comforts in the First World War', The Salvation Army, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/about-us/international-heritage-centre/international-heritage-centre-blog/new-kind-help-comforts-first-world-war>.
- 8 Pamela J. Walker, *Pulling the Devil's Kingdom Down: The Salvation Army in Victorian Britain* (1997), 80.
- 9 *Northern Whig*, 16 October 1930.
- 10 *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 October 1931.
- 11 *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 December 1907.
- 12 *Belfast News-Letter*, 7 June 1939.
- 13 See Louise A. Jackson, 'Singing birds as well as soap suds': The Salvation Army's work with sexually abused girls in Edwardian England', *Gender and History* 12, no. 1 (2000).

- ¹⁴ Brendan Fulton and Trevor Parkhill, *Making the Difference* (Probation Board of Northern Ireland, 2009), 21.
- ¹⁵ Fulton and Parkhill, *Making the Difference*, 8, 15.
- ¹⁶ *Northern Whig*, 30 July 1931.
- ¹⁷ Infanticide was an act 'whereby a woman by any wilful act or omission causes the death of her child under the age of 12 months, but [whose] mind was disturbed by reason of her not having fully recovered from the effect of giving birth or by reason of the effect of lactation consequent upon the birth of the child. An offence involving the concealment could be committed by either parent or a responsible person failing to report a birth. It is not associated with the circumstance of a child's death, just the concealment of a dead child's body'. Infanticide Act (Northern Ireland) 1939.
- ¹⁸ Clíona Rattigan, 'What Else Could I Do?': *Single Mothers and Infanticide in Ireland, 1900–1950* (IAP 2012), 217.
- ¹⁹ *Portadown Times*, 27 March 1925.
- ²⁰ *Larne Times*, 1 August 1925.
- ²¹ *Northern Whig*, 20 November 1931.
- ²² *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 July 1938.
- ²³ Armagh Prison Register, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI), HMP/1/1/2/2.
- ²⁴ Armagh Prison Register, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/3.
- ²⁵ Armagh Prison Register, PRONI, HMP/1/1/2/3.
- ²⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 15 March 1938.
- ²⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 July 1931.
- ²⁸ *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 June 1932.
- ²⁹ Short, bobbed hair became a signifier of new modern forms of femininity in the 1920s. As in this case, it was not always welcomed by more conservative family members. See Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (2004), 163.
- ³⁰ It is unclear whether this was to a specific institution, or to one run by the Salvation Army itself, as some voluntary and religious organisations had Homes of Rest for the elderly and unwell, often in seaside areas.

Chapter 6 - Workhouses

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- ² Donnacha Seán Lucey, 'Irish partition and Poor Law reform in interwar Northern Ireland', *European Review of History* 28, nos. 5–6 (2021): 795.
- ³ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 795.
- ⁴ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 796.
- ⁵ Donnacha Seán Lucey, 'On the brink of universalism: The emergency hospital services in Second World War Northern Ireland', in *Medicine, Health and Irish Experiences of Conflict 1914–1945*, ed. David Durnin and Ian Miller (Manchester University Press, 2016), 173.
- ⁶ Peter Martin, 'Social policy and social change since 1914', in *Ulster Since 1600: Politics, Economy and Society*, ed. L. Kennedy and P. Ollerenshaw (Oxford, 2013), 311.
- ⁷ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 794.
- ⁸ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 794.
- ⁹ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 795.
- ¹⁰ See Lucey, 'Irish partition'.
- ¹¹ Lucey, 'Irish partition', 801.
- ¹² Lucey, 'Irish partition', 802.
- ¹³ Clíona Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do? Single Mothers and Infanticide, Ireland 1900–1950* (Irish Academic Press, 2012), 9.
- ¹⁴ Maria Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880–1973', *Women's History Review* 20, no. 1 (2011): 111.
- ¹⁵ Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers', 111; Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Liverpool University Press, 2013), 174.
- ¹⁶ *Belfast Morning News*, 19 February 1879.
- ¹⁷ *Belfast Morning News*, 19 February 1879.
- ¹⁸ *Belfast Morning News*, 19 February 1879.
- ¹⁹ Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, 1906, vol. 1, Cd. 3202, 41.
- ²⁰ Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform, 42.
- ²¹ Evidence of Dr Darling, Co Armagh, Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, minutes of evidence Parliamentary Papers 1906, vol. 3, Cd. 3204.
- ²² Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.
- ²³ Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform, 42.
- ²⁴ Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform, 42.
- ²⁵ Judy Bolger, 'Motherhood and the Late Nineteenth-Century Irish Workhouse' (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2025), 98.
- ²⁶ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, 182.

- 27 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, 182.
- 28 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, 183.
- 29 Olwen Purdue and Georgina Laragy, *Poverty, Children and the Poor Law in Industrial Belfast* (Liverpool University Press, 2024), 96.
- 30 Olwen Purdue, 'Surviving the industrial city: The female poor and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast' *Urban History* 44, no. 1 (2017): 89.
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- 32 *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 October 1927.
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- 34 Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2021) Chapter 10, 'County homes', 1, accessed 5 November 2025, <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/chapter-10-county-homes/>.
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- 39 *Belfast News-Letter*, 22 October 1930.
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“ I don't know if you've ever spoken to a prisoner, they'll always tell you that the library is the best place to work in, well I think, and they give those library jobs to people who are white-collar workers. I think I was treated as a white-collar worker. In that I wasn't given a wet dirty job, I was given a dry clean job. It was boring, incredibly boring, folding napkins, folding pillowcases, folding sheets, all day. You never saw anybody.

“ The laundry was always busy, always very, very busy. You know there was not a time when there wasn't anything in the laundry. From those times there was always something to do.

“ There were times when I come from school and I couldn't do my homework, I had to go straight down the laundry, because they were behind. And you'd be there 'til supper time.

“ [My suitcase] had been packed, and it wasn't in my room, and when I asked, I was told I was going into the laundry. My case had already gone into the laundry, and I was to go down a particular corridor that we had never used before. Well, I did, and I was met at the other end by a nun who brought me to the dormitory, and on we went.

“ ...because of the soldier dances my father called in this social worker, and he put me in the Good Shepherd Convent in Belfast in Ormeau Road.

“ [The nuns] were grand. They were grand. They never done me no harm. I can tell you that, because they had concerts and different things, you know, at the weekend, and that there, and we had television...So no, they didn't. I didn't want to be there, of course, until I got the letter out and got home.

“ It wasn't how I felt or anything like that there. It was just total dictation...“It's a mortal sin.” And he really, really, made me feel that, it was like I committed murder.

“ She was made a slaver, made to clean...She was never the same again mentally...She was made to clean floors and things. I know that.

“ I think she was pressurised into going into the home. On my file it does say that her brother had took her up there... she had nowhere else to go. Because Granny didn't want her because of, obviously, the shame that was brought on.

“ I was eight, nine months old when mum got me back. Mum did say I was a bit of a handful because, obviously...we were strangers to each other. We didn't know each other.

“ I would often ask her who my father was and she, “oh, forget about it...why do you need to know?” And then, you know, she started getting a bit aggressive with me. “Why do you need to know?” And I just said, “well everybody else has got a mum and dad, and I don't, and I just want to know who he is”.



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