

# Healthy Sexual Relationships & The Role of Consent

A Qualitative Research Debrief for DRCC

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# Research Sample – The Public

- **Female - 18-24 . Urban – ABC1**
  - **Male – 50 – 70+ . Rural – C2DEF**
  - **Male – 35-50 Urban/Sub-Urban – BC1C2**
  - **Female – 25- 34 Suburban - C2DE**
  - **Female- 35-50 Urban /Suburban – BC1C2**
  - **Male- 25-34 – Urban -ABC1**
  - **Male- 18-24 -Rural – C2DEF**
  - **Female 50 – 70+. Suburban- ABC1C2**
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- Ethically we informed people on the topic in advance of the research & conducted a pre-screening interview to ensure participants not over-dominant/willing to listen to others.
  - All agreed with statement – ‘ I am open to attending a research group and discussing the topic of sexual relationships and experience in Ireland on a general societal level.’ And ‘I am confident to express my views and respectful that others have different views’
  - We provided suitable help lines and resources in case any of the discussion triggered adverse reactions from participants

# Legal Definition of ‘Consent’: Public Support

- ***“A person consents to a sexual act if he or she freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act.”***
  - (Section 9 of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act 1990, inserted by s. 48 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017)
- The Public believe it is broadly good with the focus on ‘freely and voluntarily’
  - However, they believe it should focus on an overall sexual encounter as well on a series of ‘acts’
- Also believe it should be continuous (eg. consenting, consensual) so could be terminated within an ‘act’ (if not comfortable) not just before an ‘act’..
  - *‘When you are in the bedroom, just because you have started, it doesn’t mean you have the right to finish.’*(Male, 18-24, C2DE, Rural).
- Public believe it will stay hard to prosecute and convict people, due to the subjectivity of participants, presence of intoxicants, lack of witnesses/ objective evidence and ‘soft’ sentencing

# ‘Consent’ = a Complex Contentious Topic

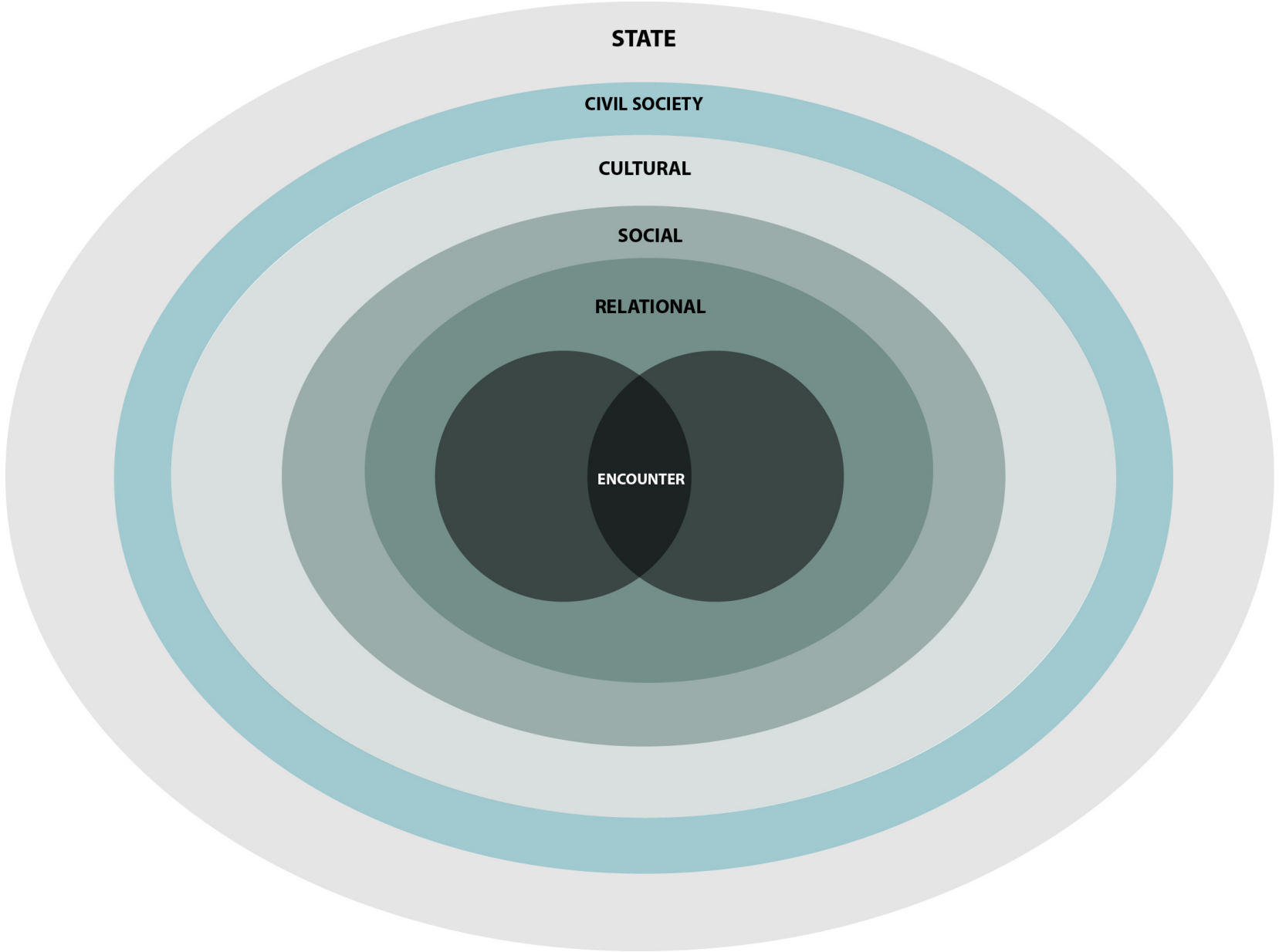
- For majority of the Public and Stakeholders ‘consent’ as language is mainly understood in context of ‘absence of consent’ /possible rapes/crimes
  - *‘Consent is cultural short-hand for Rape’ (Stakeholder)*
- Legal framing lies around possible ‘absence’ versus ‘presence’ of consent during sexual encounter - after the fact and quite often with no/limited witnesses
  - This means that many of the public connect with the topic as a potential participant in a ‘courtroom drama’ versus a participant in a mutually positive sexual encounter
- Public struggle with the ‘burden of proof’ required to demonstrate lack of consent – **in practice**
  - Massive sympathy for (authentic) victims from everyone
  - Some concern /hesitation for falsely accused ‘Perpetrators’

# ‘Consent’ = a Complex Contentious Topic

- Concern that ‘consent’ can be distorted through ignorance, arrogance, delusion, coercion and intoxication
  - *‘Verbal/non-verbal acquiescence needs to be seen **‘in the round’**’* (Stakeholder)
- Awareness from experienced adults and stakeholders that consent is **relational**, continual, experiential, mutually agreed and mutually agreeable
  - Grounded in trusting yourself, connecting and exploring with the other and respecting boundaries
  - *‘Consent is **not a black and white issue** – its complicated, contextual and continual – navigating consent requires massive skill, self-knowledge and the ability to manage boundaries’* (Stakeholder)
  - *‘Your Yes means Yes, Your No means No and Your Maybe means No’* (Stakeholder)
- Specific cultural ‘norms’ and practices need to be respected and reflected in the national conversation

# Research Framework for ‘Consent’

- We have explored consent with the public and the stakeholders through a systems lens around healthy sexual encounters, experiences and relationships
- This allows us to understand whether and how people want to improve healthy sexual experiences for everyone and what they see as the current barriers and blockers
- It allows us to separate our understanding of the *deepest meaning* and value of ‘consent’ as Irish people **experience** it versus the *current language*/framing of consent in **social discourse**
- It also helps us understand what level and type of change people want to see – and who they see as the ideal change-makers across the public, civil society and the State.



**ENCOUNTER**



# Encounter

- Every sexual encounter is unique & needs to be navigated/negotiated/improvised
  - *‘Sex is the most natural thing in the world, but it never happens naturally’ (Stakeholder)*
- Many people learn through ‘trial and error’ – from encounters with different or the same partner(s)
- At its most basic level, each sexual encounter involves the expectations and experience of two (or more) people
  - In a first encounter, *less known* parameters – less ‘taken-for-granted’
  - In a repeated encounter, *more known* parameters – more ‘taken for granted’
  - In an established relationship/marriage, there can be an expected pattern which can build frustration, resentment, entitlement, abuse etc.
- In all cases these factors can also be altered by alcohol & drugs, hormones or other life context (finishing exams, getting fired, having a child, anniversaries, getting older)

# Encounter

- *‘After being in a long-term relationship and then coming out of it at the other side, I feel like there is still this emphasis on sex happening when people are intoxicated, in some shape or form, and I think that really is at the backbone of everything. Being single now and trying to meet people and stuff, you are most likely – it’s either Tinder, or going out and getting drunk and going home with somebody. **And I feel there is a kind of gap of healthily being able to have sexual relationships and mature ones outside of being intoxicated when you’re single**’.* (Female 18-24, ABC1, Urban)
- *‘With alcohol, I think there is a line. Like it can lower your inhibitions and make you in the mood for it sort of thing but **there is a point where it does cloud your judgement** and with drugs, that is just a whole different kettle of fish and that is just a bad idea altogether’.* (Male 18-24, C2DE, Rural)

# Encounter

- Sexual encounters can be hugely pleasurable, transformative and life-affirming but can also be messy, awkward, disappointing, embarrassing
  - *‘Many people’s first sexual experiences are far from perfect’* (Stakeholder)
- It requires courage, empathy, sensitivity and resilience to **handle rejection** –rejecting another or being rejected
  - *‘Anyone can take their kit off – it takes courage to take your psycho-sexual kit off’* (Stakeholder)
- Our personal history can mean that we put priority on others needs at expense of our own
  - *‘We need to normalize **ownership of our own bodies from a young age** – you don’t have to kiss that weird aunt or uncle if you don’t want to – you don’t pull other people’s hair without asking them.....’*  
(Stakeholder)

# Encounter

- *‘What is a sexual act? Is a kiss a sexual act? If you are dancing with someone in a nightclub and they kiss you, you know, they wouldn’t really ask; I don’t know maybe they would but if you are dancing and there is chemistry, do they have to go ‘can I kiss you?’ That would be weird.’ (Male 25-35, ABC1, Urban)*
- *‘I think it **probably comes back to how people learn** and if they want to have healthy sexual relationships, it’s not about trying to get what you want. Again, **you’re talking about equality, a balancing act.** That balance between two people is really the healthy aspect of relationships’. (Male 50-70, C2DE, Rural)*

**RELATIONAL**

# Relational

- **Sexual Encounters** grounded in *relational dynamics*
  - What does each person (really) want and (really) need?
  - Power, Love, Control, Safety, Novelty, Creativity, Growth
  - What will they give/give up to get this?
  - This can be conscious and/or unconscious
- **Within Sex**
  - Agreement based on give/take versus dominance/surrender?
- **Around Sex**
  - What do they want before, during and after sex?
  - What happens if this changes?
    - Lack of Consent (at time) versus Regret (afterwards)
    - One Night Stand (at time) versus On-going Relationship (afterwards)
- **Beyond Sex**
  - Being wanted, being valued, attractive, validated, 'seen'
  - Self-esteem, other-esteem, 'Pity-sex'
  - Growth, connection, maturity

# Relational

- *'I feel like guys feel they have to take charge of these situations to express what they want. To be this big, masculine, sexual force, they have to just do it and not talk about it. They think they should know what they're doing enough for it to be comfortable and fantastic. I think it leads back to this whole masculine/feminine imbalance'. (Female, 18-24, ABC1 Urban)*
- *'With one-night stands is that it is obviously great when it works and both parties know the terms and they are both happy to have a one-night stand and leave it there but there are of course situations where people have a one-night stand and maybe like one person who is less invested in this thing going forward' (Male, 25-35, ABC1, Urban)*
- *'Sex has an emotional aspect – it's not as simple as saying more sex is better' (Stakeholder)*
- *'People 'consent' to things they don't want , because they want something else... – there's a big difference between letting someone kiss you on the dancefloor and being anally raped down an alley' (Stakeholder)*

**SOCIAL**



# Social – Peers

- Peers share experiences and expectations to a degree, but these cannot always be trusted
  - For young men in particular, competitiveness, bravado and posturing can leave people confused and lost
  - Women build stronger support and more open communication
    - Women in 70's started reading 'The Joy of Sex' to learn more about it
  - Some sub- cultures more open than others about real sexual encounters - for example music business, LGBTQ
- Some friend-groups will protect a male friend reputation at the expense of a female friend after an 'unwanted sexual encounter'
  - There is fear and tentativeness from all genders about standing up to a potential sexual perpetrator or standing up for a potential sexual victim
  - *'Say if one of my friends came to me in confidence and said that she slept with our other friend and that he wasn't consensual and she had a bad experience, you're stuck in this position of dealing with it with her privately or bringing it out to the whole group and making it a big huge thing which could possibly disintegrate the whole group'* (Female, 18-24, ABC1, Urban).

# Social - Peers

- *'Bravado, we've all come across it. I know I've definitely embellished the truth myself; you know as they say, 'never let the truth ruin a good story'. There are elements of whether you believe them or not as well. But I remember when I was in secondary school being totally shocked by some of the carry-on of some of my peers. Like what the hell? Finding glossy mags under me brother's mattress and they're talking about doing it with their friends'. (Male, 35-50, BC1C2, Suburban)*
- *'People lose their virginity at different ages and if you are in a friend group where a lot of your friends aren't virgins and then all of a sudden, you are 21 and you are, then there is a bigger pressure even if there is nothing inherently wrong with that.'* (Male, 25-35, ABC1, Urban)
- *'I remember being a young lad in school and everybody asking 'have you had your first wank yet?' so you are pressurised into doing it. So, a lot of people on my... I don't know why young lads have such an interest in others first experiences; maybe in the all-boys school I don't know... (Male, 18-24, C2DE, Rural)*
- *'As a sort of cohort of young people with urges, you are just experimenting and that. You would talk to your friends like how is it going and all of that, and you would sort of assume that you are on the same path of exploring and that..'* (Female, 50-70, BC1C2, Suburban)

# Social – Parents

- A sense that today's parents are more realistic and supportive versus the past
  - *'My husband's father called into his bedroom the night before our wedding and said- 'Do you know what to do? - and then left straight away'' (Female, 50-70, BC1C2, Suburban)*
  - *'We are catching up with the rest of the world – people are less likely to be pushed into marriage than in our day' (Female, 50-70, BC1C2, Suburban)*
- However, most younger people still feeling the parental 'chats' are more protective versus empowering
  - *'Most parents don't have the 'scripts' – by 10 or 11 you know you get a strong sense that its okay to ask you parents about their 'first job' or their 'first car' but not okay to ask them about their 'first sex'..' (Stakeholder)*
- Parental expectations still loom large
  - *'I had a father call me recently concerned that his 17 –year- old son and his girlfriend are sexually active – he was worried that the girl's parents would judge them badly..' (Stakeholder)*

# Social - Parents

- *'My parents were strict Catholics – they believed that sex was only for pro-creation and when I moved in with my boyfriend – they refused to come to the house' (Expert)*
- *'I remember once I asked my mother what an orgasm was and she just threw me out of the kitchen because I had heard it somewhere and didn't know what it was, but you would think she would tell me; I was already 18 or something'. (Female, 50 - 70, BC1C2, Suburban)*
- *'My parents; mainly from my mum, we would be very close and you just don't want to disappoint your parents if you are close to them and then fear. It must be the whole God fear but it is a case of don't get pregnant' (Female, 35-50, ABC1, Suburban)*
- *'Mine is completely taboo. We never had 'that talk'. None of the siblings did either. It was just the way we were raised' (Male 18-24, Rural)*

# Social – Role Models

- Role models also from outside our direct family and friends
  - *‘I know this couple and they are always posting images of themselves on social media – but then I moved in with them- they literally didn’t talk and every time they see each other, they’d be screaming the head off each other but then on Instagram, it’s this perfect relationship.’* (Female, Abc1, 18-24 , Urban)
- Media, novels, film, reality TV and pornography all set up a variety of expectations and ‘scripts’\*
- Non-Irish people can have enormous impact on people around expectations, communication, behaviour and ‘open culture’
  - The families in Spain
  - The girl from Spain
  - The woman in America
  - The cousins from Holland

# Social – ‘Scripts\*’

- In the absence of trustworthy reference points from peers, parents or role models, we rely upon social ‘scripts\*’ to frame expectations/ experiences within sexual encounters:
  - Expert (Male) /Novice (Female)
  - Active (Male) /Passive (Female)
  - ‘Virgin /Whore’ : Female
  - ‘Player/Wimp’: Male
  - ‘Slut-Shame’ vs. ‘Slut – Pride’
  - Perfect Couples /Perfect Sex-Lives/ Perfect Bodies
  - Quantity of Sex versus Quality of Sex
  - Rape involves Violent Strangers versus People we Know
  - Market (Transactional) versus Moral (Relational)

\* Various versions of these ‘scripts’ also play out in LGBTQ+ dynamics and contexts

# Social 'Scripts'

- *'I had an encounter before, and it was normal or whatever, and then the guy kind of did something that hurt me or was kind of strange and I was like 'why are doing that, it's weird', and he was like 'oh I see it in porn all the time, I thought you would love it' (Female, 18-24, ABC1, Urban)*
- *'There's a view that if you're a young man and you're sexually active – you don't respect girls – if you're a young woman and you're sexually active – you don't respect yourself' (Stakeholder)*
- *'Men want to be able to call out bad behaviour when they see it – but they are not empowered – they are trapped inside the 'masculinity' bubble' (Stakeholder)*
- *'Sting and Trudy and the tantric sex hold up an ideal that we cannot meet – just as misleading as other versions of fantasy' (Stakeholder)*
- *'As a young woman growing up in the 90's – there was 'cat –calling' and people stuck their hands up your skirt and you just shrugged it off and said nothing.. because we had been socialized to accept it' (Stakeholder)*

**CULTURAL**



# Cultural

- There is an out - dated approach to sexual education, basic biology, religious school ethos and ad hoc programmes for students /parents in schools
  - This gap is somewhat patched up by progressive civil society initiatives, Foróige, Richie Sadlier, Bystander etc. but these approaches are not mandatory or universally available and applied
  - *‘We have been lobbying Government for a change in the curriculum – **the teachers want to teach the students about these topics** but they are embarrassed and don’t know how to approach it’ (Stakeholder)*
- In the absence of sustained comprehensive interactive sexual education, people are learning ‘norms’ from media, sensationalist news and on-line pornography
  - There are some more realistic dramas (Normal People) and government campaigns (No Excuses) as counter-balance
  - Concern from Muslim and Traveller ethnic groups that there need to be specific content, formats and support structures for women and men from the cultures

# Cultural

- *‘Nobody taught us about anything – when we got married – we bought the Joy of Sex to try and teach ourselves about sex’ (Female, 50-70, Bc1C2, Suburban)*
- *‘As a public, we’re more comfortable discussing what we wouldn’t have 30 years ago. There’s not the same shame behind sex and that’s in all facets of it. Even with the online dating, there’s local papers with the ads for looking for love, good for single farmers’ (Male 35-50 , BC1C2, Suburban)*
- *‘We didn’t know how to deal with two cultural forces – on one hand we had the Catholic church – and on the other we were supposed to buy vibrators from Ann Summers’ (Stakeholder)*
- ***‘We discuss pornography as fantasy – in the real world, every time somebody delivers you a pizza – they don’t stay around for a shag’ (Stakeholder)***

# CIVIL SOCIETY

# Civil Society

- A sense from the Public that the work of crisis-response groups, help-lines, clinics, refugees, legal aid, advocacy, youth work is massively valuable but completely stretched and under-resourced
- Stakeholders have developed valuable, effective programmes and workshops (e.g. Real U, Bystander, BodyRight etc.) but these are NOT being delivered universally – across all genders, ages and sub-cultures
  - There are still pockets and patches of society where there is no level of discussion or debate or support beyond token ‘religious’ classes
  - ‘Repeal the 8th’ seen as a great example of a campaign where people stood up for each other, fathers stood up for their daughters and people’s stories were heard.
  - Sporting Organisations have the opportunity to reposition themselves from being ‘breeding grounds for toxic masculinity’ to using their positive platform and influence to support all genders and age-groups?

# Civil Society

- *‘I think they’re underfunded. I think they are heroes; without them a lot of people would be in an awful lot of difficulty. There just isn’t enough of the services. Mind you, the mark of a civilised society is how the government looks after its poor and vulnerable and if they don’t do that, they’re not a civilised society’. (Male 50- 70, C2DEF, Rural)*
- *‘We have the programme – Real U – and we know it works – and we are training the trainers to deal with youth groups and young offenders in Oberstown – we have offered it to the Dept. to roll out’ (Stakeholder)*
- *‘There does need to be ...a support system as well which is integrated across society. Even if you’re young or you’re not, who do you talk to if you’re not within groups of people who talk about these things all the time? Who do you pick up the phone to?’ (Male, 50-70, C2DEF, Rural)*

# THE STATE

# The State

- This Irish Public strongly believe that **universal, compulsory life-long education** is needed around healthy sexual experience
  - **Requires a paradigm shift in terms of the role, responsibility, focus and the level of State investment over time**
  - *‘Look at how much has changed in Ireland due to sustained State investment over decades around road safety, alcohol and driver behaviour – these days you wouldn’t dream of drinking or driving but in our parents’ day – they did’ (Louise O’Neill)*
- This education needs to be holistic, interactive, dynamic and empowering and help people to understand their own bodies and sexuality and navigate sexual experiences and relationships with others
  - Some good programme in primary school around bullying, RSE and restorative justice but needs more- secondary, 3<sup>rd</sup> level, workplace
  - (Some young men and young women argued that it should be mandatory – possibly even with an exam/certificate?)
  - Youth workers, Sports groups and Community Groups for older men and women could also benefit from interactive workshops
- Stakeholder strongly support this across the board – some including DRCC have already developed programmes that could be rolled out across all levels of education and into the work-place
  - Cultural minorities want to tailor the content, materials and examples to better connect with their cultural beliefs and experiences

# The State

- The Public believe that the State has an opportunity to step up its focus, investment and ‘join the dots’ across departments in helping to cultivate positive healthy sexual experiences for all in Ireland.
  - Credit is given to the Government for recent legislation around Consent, Coercion, Sexual Harassment and Government public campaigns around ‘No Excuses’ and encouraging Bystanders to speak up
- A sense that Education is the lynch-pin but that Justice also needs more reform – training Judges, juries, gardai and making the process of rape-trials less traumatic for victims, and speedier/harsher convictions/sentencing for perpetrators.
- Department of Health and others also need to integrate their programmes so that people connect sexual health with emotional, mental and relational aspects and all children have stronger role-models and protection from violent environments
  - *‘Look at Mental Health – it was hidden and shameful and now we all discuss it out in the open’ (Male – 35-50, BC1C2, Urban)*
- There is a need to tackle/restrict access to porn and place restrictions/penalties on technology providers and platforms
  - *‘Challenge this Glossy, Weirdo, Porno Culture which is altering youth perspective on the opposite sex..(Male, 35-50, BC1, C2, Suburban)*
- As a Mature, Progressive State, Ireland can invest, support and guide every person to navigate positive healthy consensual sexual relationships with others over their lifetime.



# The State

- *‘The State have the power to change the law, they have the power to do something about this, the power to change the education system, they have the power to do it all. Start the basics the for the next 30 years and build it up. That’s the governments job, to put the framework in place. Give the judges the guidance and all that but they don’t because they listen to the Catholic church who have far too much power in this country still. I know it’s diluted, not what it used to be. Until they leave it behind and stop this nonsense and move to a secular society, which is what we should be, and not pour any religion down anyone’s throat. Then we can move forward, and we can have what we want in 30 years but it’s going to take the government to produce legislation, the education system, everything, to go forward’.* (Male, 50-70, C2DEF, Rural)

