Ireland Consent Research 2021
Sexual behaviour and sexual consent
Understandings and attitudes

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Research objectives

To understand public:

• attitudes and associations
• values and priorities
• hopes and barriers

To measure:

• scale of support for values and principles
• indicators of confusion or complexity
Research structure

- Research and campaign review
- Stakeholder interviews
- Qualitative groups
- Quantitative poll
Consent principles

To structure our research we have considered three core principles for consent:

• Individual agency
• Mutual respect
• Shared willingness
Consent practice

To structure our research we have broken down the practice of consent into four parts:

- Knowing what you want: understanding your own sexual likes/dislikes
- Sharing what you want: communicating each other’s likes/dislikes
- Experiencing what you want: sharing likes and discovering more
- Changing what you want: The freedom to change anything at any stage before/during and after
Consent practice

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- Knowing what you want
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- Changing what you want
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Qualitative interviews and groups
Karen Hand - Strategy & Research
Ireland Consent Research 2021
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Quantitative poll
Survey of nationally representative sample of adults
Conducted by Opinions September 2021
A snapshot of where we are currently

Public values and understanding of consent
The potential for change

Public support for values and principles underpinning consent

• 9-in-10 women and 8-in-10 men agree that everyone has the right to change their mind at any point during sex.
The potential for change

Public support for values and principles underpinning consent

- 9-in-10 women and 8-in-10 men agree that everyone has the right to change their mind at any point during sex.

- Majority of 9-in-10 consider mutual respect, trust and shared willingness to be very or extremely important between partners.
The potential for change

Public support for values and principles underpinning consent

- 77% agree that sexual activity is *consensual* when each person has equal power to control the situation.
The potential for change

Public support for values and principles underpinning consent

• 77% agree that sexual activity is consensual when each person has equal power to control the situation.

• 75% agree that consent applies to any unwanted sexual behaviour and that better understanding of consent will help equality between women and men.
A snapshot of where we are currently

How would you describe consent in Ireland?
A snapshot of where we are currently

How would you describe consent?

- An overwhelming majority 70% see a problem with sexual consent in Ireland.
A snapshot of where we are currently
How would you describe consent?

• An overwhelming majority 70% see a problem with sexual consent in Ireland. Consent is seen as a problem by far more women 76% than men 63%
A snapshot of where we are currently

What contributes to the problem?
A snapshot of where we are currently

**What contributes to our problem with sexual consent?**

- Some people think that *consent can be ignored* – that ‘no’ really means ‘maybe’

- **Alcohol limits people’s ability** to consent to sexual activity

- People do not understand that *consent can be withdrawn* as well as given

- People are **not good at talking** clearly about sex and consent
A snapshot of where we are currently

**What contributes to our problem with sexual consent?**

- People **lack the confidence to pause a sexual encounter** if they feel uncomfortable.
- **Pornography creates unrealistic expectations** that adds to pressure to go further.
- There’s **social pressure to go further** than people are comfortable with.
- **People are confused** about what constitutes full consent.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Complexity and confusion
Two people meet through a dating site, when one initiates sex the other person says to stop but doesn’t resist physically.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, only one of them is very drunk and they have sex.

A college student at a party is not comfortable with the way a sexual encounter is going but does not say stop.

A person does not enjoy a sexual encounter, but doesn’t say stop so as not to upset the other person.

A spouse no longer feels attracted to or interested in having sex with their partner but agrees to do so anyway.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, they are both drunk and have sex.

Two people agree to have sex. One of them regrets that it happened afterwards.
Two people meet through a dating site, when one initiates sex the other person says to stop but doesn’t resist physically. 4% sounds consensual, 19% may or may not be, 71% doesn’t sound consensual, 5% I don’t know.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, only one of them is very drunk and they have sex. 7% sounds consensual, 33% may or may not be, 53% doesn’t sound consensual, 7% I don’t know.

A college student at a party is not comfortable with the way a sexual encounter is going but does not say stop. 11% sounds consensual, 34% may or may not be, 47% doesn’t sound consensual, 7% I don’t know.

A person does not enjoy a sexual encounter, but doesn’t say stop so as not to upset the other person. 24% sounds consensual, 39% may or may not be, 30% doesn’t sound consensual, 7% I don’t know.

A spouse no longer feels attracted to or interested in having sex with their partner but agrees to do so anyway. 32% sounds consensual, 37% may or may not be, 22% doesn’t sound consensual, 8% I don’t know.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, they are both drunk and have sex. 23% sounds consensual, 52% may or may not be, 18% doesn’t sound consensual, 8% I don’t know.

Two people agree to have sex. One of them regrets that it happened afterwards. 63% sounds consensual, 23% may or may not be, 7% doesn’t sound consensual, 7% I don’t know.

All adults
Two people meet through a **dating site**, when one initiates sex the other person says to stop but doesn’t resist physically.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, **only one of them is very drunk** and they have sex.

A college student at a party is not comfortable with the way a sexual encounter is going but does not say stop.

A person **does not enjoy a sexual encounter**, but doesn’t say stop so as not to upset the other person.

A spouse **no longer feels attracted to or interested** in having sex with their partner but agrees to do so anyway.

Two people meet on a night of drinking, they are **both drunk and have sex**.

Two people agree to have sex. One of them **regrets that it happened afterwards**.

<table>
<thead>
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**Female <35**

**Male <35**
A snapshot of where we are currently

Understanding personal likes/dislikes
A snapshot of where we are currently

Knowing what you want and don’t want

• 23% people say they are not sure they understand their own sexual likes and dislikes.

[Image: A bar chart showing the distribution of people's understanding of their sexual likes and dislikes. Red bars represent men, gray bars represent women.]
A snapshot of where we are currently knowing what you want and don’t want

• 23% people say they are not sure they understand their own sexual likes and dislikes. This increases to 42% for younger women and 36% for younger men.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Knowing what you want and don’t want

- 23% people are not sure they understand their own sexual likes and dislikes. This increases to 42% for younger women and 36% for younger men.

- 25% people are not sure they understand their partner’s sexual likes and dislikes.
A snapshot of where we are currently
Knowing what you want and don’t want

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• 25% people are not sure they understand their partner’s sexual likes and dislikes. This increases to 30% for younger men.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Sources of information
The potential for change

Where we get information and where we should get information

- Secondary schools, third level education, friends, family and the internet are considered the **most common sources** of information about consent.
The potential for change

Where we get information and where we should get information

• Secondary schools, third level education, friends, family and the internet are considered the most common sources of information about consent.

• When people are asked where they think are the best places to learn, people rate state education system; primary, secondary and third level important along with parents and state bodies then NGOs.
The potential for change

Where we get information and where we should get information

• Secondary schools, third level education, friends, family and the internet are considered the **most common sources** of information about consent.

• When people are asked where they think are the best places to learn, people rate all **education system; primary, secondary and third level** important along with **parents and state bodies** then NGOs.

• There is an age split about **friends** and **digital media**, with younger people considering them better places than older people.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Communicating consent
A snapshot of where we are currently

What are considered acceptable signals of consent?

- 7-in-10 see **verbal expression** as important and acceptable way to understand willingness to be sexual.
A snapshot of where we are currently

**What are considered acceptable signals of consent?**

- 7-in-10 see **verbal expression** as important and acceptable way to understand willingness to be sexual.

- A large minority of **37%** see **body language** as an acceptable way to understand willingness to have sex.
A snapshot of where we are currently

What are considered acceptable signals of consent?

• 7-in-10 see verbal expression as important and acceptable way to understand willingness to be sexual.

• A large minority of 37% see body language as an acceptable way to understand willingness to have sex.

• Significant minorities agree that having had sex previously, flirting or not clearly objecting signal willingness to be sexual.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Difficulties communicating
A snapshot of where we are currently

**Embarrassment, awkwardness and age**

- 25% people agree ‘talking ruins the mood’
A snapshot of where we are currently

Embarrassment, awkwardness and age

- 25% people agree ‘talking ruins the mood’. This increases to 39% for younger men.

Men <35

All adults
A snapshot of where we are currently

**Embarassment, awkwardness and age**

- 25% people agree ‘talking ruins the mood’. This increases to 39% for younger men.

- 28% people agree that they wouldn’t know how to talk about their sexual likes and dislikes with a partner.
A snapshot of where we are currently
**Embarrassment, awkwardness and age**

- 25% people agree ‘talking ruins the mood’. This increases to 39% for younger men.

- 28% people agree that they *wouldn’t know how to talk about their sexual likes and dislikes with a partner*. This increases to 39% for younger men.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Embarrassment, awkwardness and age

- 35% people say that **embarrassment would stop them talking** about their sexual likes and dislikes with a partner.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Embarrassment, awkwardness and age

• 35% people say that embarrassment would stop them talking about their sexual likes and dislikes with a partner. This increases to 41% for younger women and men.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Consideration of partner
Personal opinions and approach to consent

• **3-in-4** majority see their own sexual experience as dependent on their partner’s enjoyment ‘I’d prefer to stop if I suspect my partner is not enjoying sex’.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Personal opinions and approach to consent

- 3-in-4 majority see their own sexual experience as dependent on their partner’s enjoyment ‘I’d prefer to stop if I suspect my partner is not enjoying sex’.

- 9-in-10 agree it’s important that ‘your partner does not feel regret afterwards’. A majority of people put their partner’s pleasure and lack of regret ahead of their own pleasure and lack of regret.
A snapshot of where we are currently

Personal opinions and approach to consent

• For a 1-in-5 minority, their own sexual experience is more important than their partner’s lack of enjoyment agreeing that ‘I’d probably keep going even if I suspect my partner is not enjoying sex’.
A snapshot of where we are currently

**Personal opinions and approach to consent**

- For a 1-in-5 minority, their own sexual experience is more important than their partner’s lack of enjoyment agreeing that ‘I’d probably keep going even if I suspect my partner is not enjoying sex’. **This increases to 2-in-5 younger men.**
A snapshot of where we are currently

What could change?
The potential for change

Who could/should do more?

- 84% agree we need **age-appropriate sex education** in all schools.

September 2021

Opinions
The potential for change

Who could/should do more?

- 84% agree we need age-appropriate sex education in all schools
- 60% say consent is a responsibility for all society and needs Government action
The potential for change

Who could/should do more?

- 84% agree we need age-appropriate sex education in all schools

- 60% say consent is a responsibility for all society and needs Government action

- 38% women and men say **they would sign up** to a sexuality and consent course if it was available.
A snapshot of where we are currently

What are the wider benefits?
The potential

What does the public see as benefits of addressing consent

- 81% agree talking about consent is a real opportunity for people in Ireland to have a more healthy relationship with sex and sexuality
The potential

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• 81% agree talking about consent is a real opportunity for people in Ireland to have a more healthy relationship with sex and sexuality

• 78% agree a better understanding of consent would help people deal with sexual encounters they don’t enjoy
The potential
What does the public see as benefits of addressing consent

• **81%** agree talking about consent is a real opportunity for people in Ireland to have a **more healthy relationship with sex and sexuality**

• **78%** agree a better understanding of consent would help people **deal with sexual encounters they don’t enjoy**

• **72%** agree a better understanding of consent will **help equality between women and men**
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