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From the Archives
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‘Mother’s Advice on Condoms’

National Library of Ireland
IQA Ms. 46,004/2

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***Irish Press*, 2 July 1990**

National Library of Ireland, Irish Queer Archive, Ms. 46,004/2

One of the most profound changes to have occurred in Irish society in the past half-century has been the gradual reform and liberalisation of law pertaining to sex, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. A recent milestone in this process was the 2018 vote to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution, which had since 1983 imposed a near-total ban on abortion in Ireland. In the context of the 2018 referendum, it is not so long ago that Irish citizens were campaigning for open access to contraception. The history of contraceptive law in Ireland casts a long shadow over women’s reproductive rights. However, for another group in Irish society, namely the LGBT community, access to condoms became a life or death issue during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and ‘90s.

The Irish Queer Archive, collected by activist Tonie Walsh, former president of the National LGBT Federation (NXF) and founder of Gay Community News (GCN), is a collection of material relating to homosexuality and the queer community in Ireland and abroad. In it is an extensive collection of newspaper articles and information printed in Ireland and abroad during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. These clippings detail AIDS activism, legislation, organisation, and document the state of both opinion and legislation regarding sexual health or contraception. One of the articles contained in this archive is a letter to the editor of one of Ireland’s national daily newspapers, the *Irish Press* from a concerned mother in the summer of 1990, making an exasperated but not uncommon plea for the loosening of legislation surrounding condom sales.

In 1990, the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) faced prosecution for selling condoms in the Dublin branch of Virgin Megastore, music retail chain. Under fire from the law and the press, the IFPA found an unlikely ally in a Mrs. P. O’Reilly, a veteran contraceptive rights campaigner who, in a letter to the editor published in the *Irish Press* in the same year, made an impassioned intervention in support of the IFPA.

Under the 1979 Health (Family Planning) Bill, only pharmacists were allowed to sell contraceptives. Even then, anyone hoping to purchase them would need a prescription from a medical professional, who was only able to prescribe them ‘for family planning purposes or for

adequate medical reasons and in appropriate circumstances.¹ In practice, this meant that contraceptives, including condoms, were only legally available to married heterosexual couples.

This was amended by the 1985 Health (Family Planning) Act, which made it legal to purchase condoms without a prescription to people over 18 years old. However, contraceptives could only be sold in chemists, doctors' surgeries, family planning clinics, or in hospitals which provided STI or maternity services. Functionally, this made condoms slightly more available, but it put anyone hoping to purchase them – be it for contraceptive purposes or as a preventative measure against STIs, particularly HIV/AIDS – at the mercy of professionals in this limited category of vendors.

As a 'committed (but rather shy and not so vocal) passenger on the "original contraceptive train," O'Reilly was strongly in favour of both the IFPA and loosening restrictions on condom sales. Balancing both humour and sincere conviction, she told the readers of the *Irish Press* how:

As the mother of two teenagers who will shortly be waving goodbye to the land of saints and scholars. I shall certainly suggest (suspecting that there may be moments when they are neither saintly nor scholarly) that they take a few packets of condoms along with the insect repellent and the coconut oil!

Though she expressed a wish that young people should wait until marriage, or at least a committed relationship, to have sex, O'Reilly recognized that sex was a fact of life. In light of the dangers of unplanned pregnancy and the AIDS epidemic, which had been present in Ireland since the eighties, Mrs O'Reilly believed these restrictions to be a '...ludicrous and criminally dangerous policy to hamper young people in their attempt to practice sexual responsibility.' She argued:

...since those little bits of rubber can help protect them from AIDS or an unplanned pregnancy, what mother would dismiss her children from using them [condoms]? And what other country in the world would deny a responsible group like the Irish Family Planning Association the right to sell them?

Mrs. O'Reilly's humorous and passionate defence of the IFPA and the right of young people to access condoms highlights the long history of the reproductive rights debate in Ireland. Her

¹ Health (Family Planning) Act, 1979, available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1979/act/20/section/4/enacted/en/html#sec4>

concern for the health and safety of her children shows a different take on the issue of contraception.

While the IFPA were eventually successful in their bid to liberalise the restriction on the sale of condoms, the issues highlighted in Mrs O'Reilly's letter remain relevant in Ireland today. Although advances in both the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS have improved dramatically, the *Irish Times* reported in 2017 how 'a growing ambivalence about the disease is putting increasing numbers of people at risk.'² HIV Ireland, an organisation founded as the Dublin AIDS Alliance in 1987, reports that 8,341 people having been diagnosed as HIV-positive in Ireland since the first case in the 1980s.³

Jen Falgout
2017-18 MA in Public History
UCD School of History
Series Editor: Abigail Smith

Further Reading:

'HIV in Ireland', <http://www.hivireland.ie/hiv/hiv-in-ireland/>, 9 March 2018.

HIV Ireland, National HIV and AIDS Archive, <https://www.hivireland.ie/policy-news-and-media/national-hiv-and-aids-archive/>

'Ireland's Sexual and Reproductive Health History,' Irish Family Planning Association Website, <https://www.ifpa.ie/Media-Info/History-of-Sexual-Health-in-Ireland>, 9 March 2018.

Wade, Jennifer, 'In aftermath of Savita death, Richard Branson recalls arrest for selling condoms in Ireland', *The Journal*, 19 November 2012. <http://www.thejournal.ie/in-%20aftermath-of-savita-death-richard-branson-recalls-arrest-for-selling-condoms-in-%20ireland-680934-Nov2012/>

² Conor Gallagher, 'Record numbers of people diagnosed with HIV', *Irish Times*, 11 May 2017.

³ 'HIV in Ireland', <http://www.hivireland.ie/hiv/hiv-in-ireland/>, 22 August 2018.

'Mother's advice on condoms', *Irish Press*, 2 July 1990
 'File of newspaper cuttings relating to AIDS', Irish Queer Archive Ms. 46,004/2
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