

# Rights, Sexuality and Relationships in Ireland: “It’d be nice to be kind of trusted”

Grace Kelly, Helen Crowley & Carol Hamilton  
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308-315.

Reviewed by Bob McCormack

# Overview

- A very readable and insightful Irish paper reporting on the sexual knowledge, the desires for intimacy, and the restrictions on developing intimate relationships experienced by a sample of 15 men and women in ID services in the midlands. The paper analyses 12 hours of group and individual interviews, and uses interview excerpts to highlight the key themes.

# The Irish Context for Sexuality

- The paper acknowledges the increased risk of sexual abuse for people with an ID and notes the current debate is focused on empowering people to make their own sexual choices while providing safeguards against exploitation. The 2006 *UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* obliges the state to eliminate discrimination relating to marriage, family, parenthood and relationships. However the 1993 Sexual Offences legislation prohibits sexual intercourse with someone with an ID who cannot live independently (unless married to them). This puts ID service providers in a difficult position – if they facilitate intimacy, are they aiding and abetting a criminal act? In all this, the voice of those most affected – people with an ID – is absent. This paper begins to redress that absence.

# Sexual Knowledge

The main findings here were:

- Only a quarter had benefitted from any formal sex education.
- Most sexual knowledge was acquired opportunistically, through what they saw around them, or from watching TV soaps. Some of this was confusing or misleading.
- People's knowledge was patchy and inconsistent. One woman could describe a pregnancy test, but didn't know how a woman got pregnant. A man spoke about condoms but didn't know what they were used for.
- One woman was aware that information about sexuality was deliberately not shared. Several participants requested the researcher to provide them with further information.

# Desire for Intimate Relationships

- Most of the participants has some experience of romantic attachments. Some of the men's attachment was focused on female staff ("a special friend").
- Most saw relationships as very positive, a source of support and companionship. For some the romantic aspects were important. For some men, the physical appearance was emphasised.
- Two men reported they had never been in a romantic relationship.
- Two women were not interested, one saying she was "mummy's pet" and enjoyed staying at home; the other saying repeatedly "Keep away from them!"

# Restrictions in Developing Relationships

- Most believed that relationships and kissing were not allowed in the service, that staff wouldn't be happy if you had a girlfriend.
- One man recalled being told off for consensual kissing. Some thought you could be expelled for having a girlfriend.
- Several felt their interactions with potential partners were being monitored by staff.
- Two women voiced their right to express their sexuality. The group discussions with an independent facilitator created a space for people to explore and develop their thoughts on relationships.

# Conclusions

Reviewing this paper I felt that we need to take a number of steps:

- We need to progress this conversation, involving families and people themselves. We have deliberately not talked about it, because of the dilemmas it raises.
- We need to provide recurring sexuality & relationship education at different stages in people's lives, beginning in school, and including simple, clear factual information, and also guidelines around self-protection (good touch / bad touch, etc).
- We need to amend the 1993 legislation to decriminalise consensual intimacy, while implementing the Law Reform Commission's proposals on consent.
- We can then develop clear policies and procedures for staff, to clarify their role and responsibilities in this area, and to support people in understanding and developing relationships.