

Life & Style

The Virgin condom: Campaigning for access to contraceptives across the decades

This year marks 30 years since condoms became fully available in the Republic, largely thanks to 1970s and 1980s activists

Expand



A customs officer at Connolly Station questions members of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement on their return from Belfast on Saturday, May 22nd, 1971, with contraceptives. The event was critical in opening up public discussion. Photograph: Eddie Kelly

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On February 13th, 1988, a small group of young men and women in their early 20s set up a counter in the Virgin Megastore in Dublin where they illegally sold condoms. These activists were members of the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) Youth Group. Back then, condoms could only legally be sold in licensed venues such as chemists and to people over the age of 18. This action was therefore a direct challenge to the law and attracted media attention. The condom counter resulted in substantial criticism from conservative campaigners: John O'Reilly, secretary of the Responsible Society, condemned the “sales outlet for contraceptives in the Virgin Megastore where youngsters from eight upwards go to buy their record albums”, while Dick Hogan, chairperson of Family Solidarity, asked: “Will they insist on checking birth certificates or will they just sell them to anyone?”

Today, condoms are easily accessible and unremarkable: we are accustomed to seeing them in vending machines in the bathrooms of pubs, on display in chemists, petrol stations and supermarkets, and handed out for free on student campuses across the country. It might be hard then, for many of us, to imagine a time when the humble condom was clouded in such controversy. Yet, for previous generations of Irish men and women, access to contraception was heavily restricted by both the law which banned contraception from 1935 to 1979 and by the teachings of the Catholic Church.

From the early 1970s, young Irish activists played a key part in helping to change the law around contraception. Many will be familiar with the “Contraceptive Train” organised by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement in May 1971, when a band of feminist activists travelled from Dublin to Belfast by train to purchase contraceptives and then returned to Dublin to a flurry of media attention. The Contraceptive Train was critical in opening up public discussion around the issue. It drew attention to the hypocrisy of the law which meant that those who could afford to could purchase contraceptives from Northern Ireland or from Britain, or obtain the pill as a “cycle regulator” from a sympathetic doctor. This event also complemented the work of Irish family planning clinics, which, since 1969, had been

providing contraception to the urban-based middle classes, and getting around the law by asking clients for a donation.

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The direct action campaigns of Irishwomen United, a feminist group established in 1975, are less widely known. Irishwomen United established the Contraception Action Programme (CAP) in 1976 to campaign specifically for the legalisation of contraception. CAP members were predominantly young women, and drew attention to the class and geographic disparities in relation to access to contraception. Anne Speed, one of CAP’s key activists, linked the emphasis on class disparities and CAP’s more militant approach to the youth of the group’s membership.

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CAP also stressed the absence of women’s voices in debates over contraception and organised public events at community centres so that women could share their views. Initially, activists sold contraceptives such as condoms at the Dandelion Market in Dublin. However, the group soon came to realise the necessity of providing information and services to working-class women and therefore employed radical strategies such as distributing contraceptives in housing estates. Ballymun became a focus of CAP activism, and a caravan was utilised to sell condoms and distribute leaflets there, while information on doctors who would prescribe the pill was also provided.



The 'Contraceptive Train': Women on the platform of Connolly Station in May 1971 prior to taking the train to Belfast to buy contraceptives, which were then illegal in the Republic. The event was organised by the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement. Photograph: Eddie Kelly



A Dublin protest organised by the Contraception Action Programme in 1979. Photograph: Derek Speirs

The efforts of CAP intensified following the publication of Charles Haughey's Health (Family Planning) Bill in 1978. Activists raised concerns that the Bill would transfer power from family planning clinics to doctors and make contraception expensive. CAP members therefore plotted their most radical action yet: a shop called Contraceptives Unlimited which opened on Harcourt Road, Dublin, in November 1978 and where they openly sold condoms, spermicidal jellies, creams and caps.

Despite the illegality of their activities, no legal action was taken against CAP members. According to CAP member Joanne O'Brien: "We thought we were going to be arrested. I think at that stage people must have felt that the issue, we had been campaigning for quite some time at that point. I think people were starting to feel, well, you know, people have a right to this." CAP also organised spontaneous sales of contraceptives, for instance, at the Ballymun Shopping Centre and University College Cork, as well as rallies and a "Festival of Contraception" in May 1979 at Wynn's Hotel in Dublin.

In further defiance of the Family Planning Act, the CAP caravan took to the road to sell contraceptives in October 1979 and, over several weekends,

visited disadvantaged parts of Irish cities and rural areas where people had difficulties getting access to contraception.

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The Family Planning Act came into operation in November 1980 and it soon became clear that many of the class and geographical disparities in relation to access to contraception remained. The Act allowed contraception on prescription for bona fide family planning purposes only, with this stipulation widely interpreted as meaning that contraceptives were only available to married couples. This law was not amended until 1985; from then it allowed the sale of contraceptives that did not require a prescription such as condoms and spermicides to persons over the age of 18 but only at outlets such as chemists or family planning clinics. For many people, access was dependent on a chemist that would dispense contraceptives; men and women living in rural areas were therefore often disadvantaged in terms of access.

Young people were particularly impacted by a lack of legal access to contraception and limited sex education. In recognition of these concerns, the IFPA established a youth group in 1984 which undertook a number of activities including the foundation of a telephone line for young people called the Adolescent Confidential Telephone Service, a Young People's Family Planning Centre at the IFPA clinic on Synge Street, and agony aunt columns in Hot Press and Fresh magazines. These activities drew attention to the challenges facing young people in Ireland in relation to sexual and reproductive health and provided vital support and information, particularly in the wake of the tragic death of Ann Lovett in January 1984. The group's condom counter at the Virgin Megastore was their most pivotal form of activism and became known as the "Case of the Virgin Condom".



The activists who campaigned for contraception in the 1970s to the 1990s were integral to helping to change the law; the condom became an important symbol of the tensions around social change in Ireland.

Photograph: Alan Betson

In the era of the Aids crisis, the condom counter action drew attention to the problems that many Irish people had accessing effective protection from sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. In 1989, approximately 3,249 people availed of the condom counter service, with an increase during holiday periods due to people from rural areas visiting Dublin and using the service. Ninety per cent of condoms were sold to men, and 50 per cent of clients were aged 18-25. Jon O'Brien, then IFPA youth officer, explained: "The interesting thing was young people did come along to buy them, but people came from all over the bloody country to buy them and they weren't all young people." No arrests were made and it was a full 18 months before legal action was taken against the IFPA.

The ensuing court case and subsequent appeal in 1991 attracted significant international media attention. The judge in the appeal case increased the original fine given to the IFPA from IRE400 to £500 and, as the law stood, each further condom sale could lead to a £5,000 fine, with an additional fine of £250 for every day that condoms remained on sale. An important milestone

in the case was when the rock band U2 agreed to pay the fine on behalf of the IFPA. Following the case, there was a delay before the government began to move to amend the 1985 legislation.



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Photograph: Eddie Kelly

In 1992, a short direct-action campaign, Condom Sense, was launched on Valentine's Day. The campaign was initiated by Clare Watson and Rachel Martin in Dublin, with regional groups in Cork and Galway. Condom Sense activists installed 140 condom vending machines in pubs and nightclubs around Ireland in order to further challenge the law on sale of condoms, arguing that they were essential for public health during the Aids crisis. The Condom Sense campaign put further pressure on the government in demonstrating the limitations of the law, and the Family Planning Act was eventually amended later that year in 1992 to provide more freedom around where condoms could be sold, and again in 1993 to remove the age limit and ban on the sale of condoms from vending machines.

This year, 2023, marks 30 years since the full liberation of the condom in Ireland. The activists who campaigned for contraception in the 1970s to the 1990s were integral in drawing attention to these issues and in helping to change the law; the condom became an important symbol of the tensions around social change in Ireland. Without the work of young activists who distributed condoms in unconventional spaces, such as shops, caravans and record stores, this legal change would likely have been much slower.

Contraception and Modern Ireland: A Social History, c1922-92 will be published by Cambridge University Press in March (€25). It will be free to read online (open access) [here](#)

Irish Family Planning Association

Virgin Megastore

Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland

Dáil Éireann

Catholic Church

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