2 Sexual Knowledge and Morality from the 1940s to the 1970s

In April, 1971, the following letter appeared in Angela Macnamara's problem page in *Woman's Way* magazine:

> We are two girls of fourteen. Two boys treated us very badly at a party and we and they lost control of ourselves. We didn't know what they were doing as our mothers never told us anything about life. Could they have done anything dangerous? Would it be wise for us to talk to a priest about what happened?[1]

Letters such as this one, which were not uncommon, are indicative of the confusion and ignorance among many about sexual health. They suggest that there were problems with modes of communication and that many young Irish men and women were not being taught anything by their parents about reproduction. Moreover, the fact that the two girls asked Macnamara if they should go and talk to a priest about the issue highlights the place of the priest as a regulator of morals within the community. This account is not unusual either; one oral history respondent, Ellen (b.1949) recalled a friend going to her priest for confession after she experienced a sexual assault, and her period was late:

> She didn't tell me exactly what he did, but her period was late, and she thought that she was pregnant. So, she went to confession, and she told the priest, and the priest told her she couldn't be pregnant with what happened. But she hadn't told me, but she had, whatever, she had told him. She was about 24 at the time and she didn't even realise whether she could be pregnant or not, by whatever he had done, you know?

Knowledge of reproduction and contraception was limited for many Irish men and women growing up for much of the twentieth century, and the Irish State systematically failed to provide any formal sex education despite calls for it from the early twentieth century. The Carrigan Committee, which met between 1930 and 1931, effectively ignored the recommendations of a number of female witnesses, such as Dr. Dorothy

[1] 'Angela Macnamara's help page', *Woman's Way*, 9 April 1971, p. 52.

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Stopford Price and Dr. Delia Moclair Horne who suggested that there was a strong need to provide young women and girls with sex education, and particularly for young women affected by poverty or institutionalisation.[2] As James M. Smith has shown, the Carrigan Report evaded this testimony, effectively suppressing calls for formal sex education, with echoes of this concealment to be found 'in the Catholic hierarchy's resistance to pre- and postnatal care in debates surrounding the "Mother and Child" scheme (1951) and, more recently, in attempts to thwart the "Stay Safe" program (1993)'.[3] Mandatory sex education was not introduced into Irish schools until 1997 with the establishment of the Relationships and Sexuality Programme.[4]

The attitudes and legislative initiatives of the Irish government in the 1920s and 1930s cast a long shadow over the rest of the twentieth century. Lack of access to contraception combined with the power of Catholic teaching meant that there was considerable fear around premarital sex, which also influenced how sex education was disseminated in the period with a focus on morality rather than physiology. As Tom Inglis has shown, the Church helped to create and maintain understandings of what constituted 'good moral behaviour'.[5] Pregnancy outside of marriage was seen as inherently shameful. Many of the respondents did not engage in sex before marriage because the fear of pregnancy and ensuing shame that would be brought on their families was too great. In the absence of formal sex education, young men and women were provided with moral codes regarding sexual activity, which were in turn policed by families and communities. Ultimately, this chapter shows how attitudes to sex in the period were shrouded in a culture of fear which was perpetuated by Catholic Church teachings. Yet, at the same time, women's magazines and television programmes such as The Late Late Show attempted to push against these boundaries through more open discussion of matters relating to sex and family planning.

2.1 Lack of Sexual Knowledge

The majority of oral history interviewees emphasised a lack of sex education, either from their schools or from their parents. Imelda (b.1935)

[2] James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 15.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Ann Nolan, 'The transformation of school-based sex education policy in the context of AIDS in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies,* 37:3, (2018), pp. 295–309.
[5] Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), p. 216.

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who grew up in Dublin, explained, 'To be honest with you, we didn't know where a baby or anything came from. We had to find out for ourselves and everything. We were taught from one another and all like that'. Sarah (b.1947) from the north of the country, told me, 'Nobody talked about it at school, or at home. You had to learn the hard way'. Con (b.1940) also explained that 'everything was left up to yourself to figure out or find out you know'. In her study of female sexuality in childhood in 1930s and 1940s Dublin, Hazel Lyder reported similar findings and has suggested that in relation to sex education, 'parents, lacking sufficient knowledge and language and labouring under the obligation of the sexual taboo, adhered to a code of silence'.[6] Sex education at secondary schools was non-existent for the majority of participants. Eibhlin (b.1943) recalled that the nuns in her school 'certainly didn't say as much, only, "Stay away from boys"'. Máire Leane's study, which entailed oral history interviews with 21 Irish women born between 1914 and 1955, also found that a lack of concrete knowledge about the facts of life was reported by 19 of her 21 interviewees.[7] Lack of sexual knowledge was not a uniquely Irish feature of this period. In her oral history study of family planning practices in Switzerland (1955–1970), Caroline Rusterholz reported that the majority of her participants stated that contraception and sexuality were taboo topics within their families and that they lacked knowledge of these issues during their childhood and adolescence.[8] Oral history testimony is supported by contemporary sources. Michael Solomons, wrote in 1983 about his work as a gynaecologist at Mercer's Hospital in the 1960s, stating 'Both women and men were suffering due to a lack of basic knowledge about sex. It became clear to me that more people were interested in sex than knew anything about it'.[9] Similarly, in her report for the Social Work Department of the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin in 1966, Eleanor Holmes wrote that 'proper sex education, too, has been almost entirely lacking in all strata of society'.[10]

As Carole Holohan has shown, during the 1960s, sexual themes and issues such as contraception and divorce became an increasingly visible part of popular culture as a result of imported television programmes and popular music.[11] In 1962 *Hibernia* magazine discussed the issue of sex education and the need for an educational programme which reflected the needs of the time as well as moral principles. Meanwhile, some

[6] Lyder, 'Silence and secrecy', p. 81. [7] Leane, 'Embodied sexualities', p. 32.
[8] Rusterholz, 'Reproductive behavior', p. 54. [9] Solomons, *Pro-Life?* p. 18.
[10] *Clinical Report of the Routnda Hospital, 1st January 1966 to 31st December 1966*, p. 68.
[11] Carole Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth in the Sixties*, (Liverpool University Press, 2018), p. 129.

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journalists accused the Catholic Church of pastoral neglect of young people.[12] Eleven years earlier, J. McCarthy, writing in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* in April 1951, suggested that responsibility for the sexual instruction of young people should lie with their parents, and that a 'due and properly ordered physiological education, which is integrated into and animated by the Catholic concept of marriage, is possible and commendable'.[13] Writing in the October issue, James A. Cleary discussed the changes in Irish society which meant that sex education was more needed than before. Cleary drew on his experience preaching Missions and Retreats in Ireland and other countries over thirty years. He highlighted the issue of women entering the workplace or university after leaving school and encountering men in these settings.[14] Cleary also believed that young women's curiosity was being roused at university 'where the very literature they must read contains numerous allusions to ordinary sex-matters'.[15] Moreover, he drew attention to the problem of films depicting scenes of a sexual nature in cinemas as well as the importation of 'sex-books and sexual magazines from England and America', dance-halls and company-keeping.[16] By the 1950s, dancehalls and cinema provided young people with the opportunity to participate in teenage culture and interact with peers.[17] Dances were the most common meeting place for young couples coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s. Dances were traditionally not held on Saturday nights so that young men and women would still be able to go to Mass on Sundays, and ballrooms were closed for the forty days of Lent, a practice which survived in rural areas well into the 1960s.[18]

James Cleary believed that sex instruction was particularly important for Irish girls, drawing attention to the fact that Irish women had to wait longer for marriage, with the average age of marriage being twenty-nine. The late age of marriage at this time, particularly in rural Ireland, has been explained by scholars such as Mary E. Daly and others as being a result of 'large families, the absence of any regulation governing succession, and the lack of alternative occupations' which ultimately 'gave parents considerable control over land inheritance and consequently over marriage'. In addition, for men and women who had the responsibility of

[12] Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth*, pp. 129–30.
[13] J. McCarthy, 'Preparation for marriage', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 18:2, (1 April 1951), pp. 189–91 on pp. 190–91.
[14] James A. Cleary, 'Is sex instruction needed in Ireland?', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, (1 October 1951), p. 373.
[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 373–4. [16] *Ibid.*, p. 378.
[17] Eleanor O'Toole, *Youth and Popular Culture in 1950s Ireland* (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 186.
[18] Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth*, p. 118.

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looking after their parents or siblings, marriage might never occur, or others postponed marriage until these responsibilities no longer existed.[19] Cleary stated that 'it is not rare in Ireland to meet Catholic girls of twenty or twenty five, even teachers, who are *completely* ignorant of sex-matters'.[20] While Cleary believed that mothers should provide their daughters with information, he felt that many were unwilling, embarrassed or incompetent to do this.[21] However, as Elizabeth Kiely has shown, there was a general perception in Irish society up until the 1980s that young Irish people had little or no right to sexual expression or consumption, and this was reflected in 'the perception that a formal sex education would destroy their innocence and possibly arouse sexualities that were best left latent.'[22]

Some Catholic sex education initiatives were prompted by concerns around emigration, which was perceived to be a significant threat to young people's morals.[23] Jennifer Redmond posits that young Irish women who emigrated lacked knowledge of sex due to censorship and lack of open discussion around the issue but were 'symbolically marked as sources of sexual knowledge and desires that would get them 'into trouble' upon leaving the country'.[24] Some Irish secondary schools did, therefore, begin to provide some sex education from the mid-1960s, however, this was usually very basic or focused on issues of morality rather than the physiology of reproduction. Gráinne (b.1937) remembered some discussion of sexual activity in her Leaving Cert year; however, this advice was ambiguous:

> The last couple of weeks before we left, the nun that was head over our group, Sister Cornelia, she was over the senior school Leaving Cert class and I think she kind of gave a little bit of a discussion about sexual activity and things like that, but it was so vague and you'd hardly know what she was talking about. But that's the only person who ever discussed anything like that.

By the late 1960s, not much had changed. Hugh (b.1951) recalled the following of the sex education he received at his secondary school in a small town in the west of Ireland:

> We had one or two lectures in secondary school about sex, but I mean they weren't very frank as regards the mechanics about it or anything else. Contraception wasn't

[19] Daly, *The Slow Failure*, pp. 115–18. [20] Cleary, 'Is sex instruction needed', p. 379.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Elizabeth Kiely, 'Lessons in sexual citizenship: the politics of Irish school based sexuality education' in Máire Leane and Elizabeth Kiely (eds.), *Sexualities and Irish Society* (Dublin: Orpen Press), pp. 297–320, on p. 292.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 292. [24] Redmond, 'The politics of emigrant bodies', p. 83.

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mentioned at all, you know. Except you daren't … well first you daren't have sex and secondly you daren't get a girl pregnant.

Barbara (b.1950) from a town in the south-west recalled a nun in her school trying to give her class an explanation of periods:

I remember one time a nun tried to tell us … It was mostly about periods and things and she was so embarrassed that she actually went out of the room herself. She was a reasonably young nun. I mean maybe the older nuns now would be able to toughen it out, but she didn't. She actually ran out, the face was burning off her as she ran out of the room and that was the end of her lesson.

While responsibility for sex education thus often lay with parents, many respondents felt that it was a challenge for them to openly discuss such matters. Rosie (b.1938) from the rural Midlands recalled her mother talking to her and her sister about periods. She said:

And she was ironing in the kitchen, and we were sitting down. She said, 'I want to talk to you.' And, she told us about our periods, and she told, she told us why we got periods and things like that. It took five minutes, or 10 minutes, and she, she went on ironing then, and I saw she thought, 'Well thank God, I've done me duty.'

Other mothers gave more rudimentary information. Carmel (b.1952) remembered 'She just said that you'd bleed once a month, the sanitary towels were in the bottom drawer. She told us to put it on, to put it into a bag, and she'd get rid of it, but that was it.' However, Carmel's mother did not explain why women got periods: 'Nobody said why it's happening. We were just told that's what you do to keep from ruining your clothes.' Ann (b.1945) from a town in the south-west told me that when she got her period aged 14, her mother 'just said to me, "You'll be getting those now every month." And that was it.' For girls who were not expecting to get their period, however, it could be a terrifying experience. Siobhan (b.1942) remembered her first period in the following way:

We had the old fashioned little switches, you know the one with the square. And I walked … I got up, I used to sleep walk, and I got up and I walked into that at 2 or 3 in the morning. And I screamed that morning when I woke up. I said, 'I'm covered in blood'.

Similarly, Úna (b.1942) remembered 'I was never told anything. I got my periods and I thought I was going to die'. Aoife (b.1947) also told me 'my first period arrived when I was about ten and a half, and I was frantic, because blood is dangerous, I knew I was going to die.' Deirdre (b.1936) also recalled:

I was 12 years old and my mother, she never even told me what it was, or anything you know. And, oh, they don't, back in them days, they don't talk

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about things like that. Oh, I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know what it was. And how I found out what it was, I had it twice before I … there was a girl I used to know her, she had a lot of older sisters and I was telling her one day. She said, 'That's a period.' 'How do you know?' 'I have older sisters.'

The experiences of these participants were not distinctive to Irish women. A number of participants in Lara Freidenfelds' study of menstruation in the United States reported similar incidents, however, American women born in the 1940s and 1950s, unlike their Irish counterparts, were more likely to receive information from their mothers, pamphlets or school education.[25] Closer to home, as Caroline Rusterholz found for Switzerland from the 1950s to 1970s, the taboo around sex education meant that several of her female respondents recalled feelings of distress when they began menstruating.[26]

Some interviewees reported a sense of secrecy and shame around menstruation. Nora (b.1940) said 'Well I knew what was happening all right but my mother just kind of said, "Here, put them on you." And that's that and don't tell anyone. Be secretive about it, if you like. Jeepers, I think about now, when you see all the things advertised on the television and everything.' Similarly, Paula (b.1955) said 'I was horrified actually. I was horrified at the secrecy of it. And you leave them in a bag under your bed when you're finished. And then in the night time when the men are in bed, they're burnt in the fire. That seemed to be standard.' The shame was also compounded by the size of sanitary towels. Paula explained 'they weren't like nice and discreet ones like you have now. They were ones with big loops you attach. They were horrible actually.' Similarly, Cathy (b.1949) recalled that when she got her period, her mother 'got me the old fashioned Southall sanitary towels and they had a loop … There was a belt and there was a thing on it and you looped them in the belt. That was what we had to wear. That thick. I hated them. Absolutely hated them'. The pads made Cathy feel self-conscious. She told me 'You couldn't really wear a pair of pants with them, because they were huge.' Similarly, in Lucinda McCray Beier's study, there was a strong code of secrecy and shame around menstruation which meant that many mothers in Lancashire in both the pre- and post-war period did not tell their daughters about periods.[27]

[25] Lara Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2009), pp. 38–73.
[26] Rustherolz, 'Reproductive behavior', p. 54
[27] Lucinda McCray Beier, '"We were as green as grass": learning about sex and reproduction in three working-class Lancashire communities, 1900–1970', *Social History of Medicine*, 16:3, (2003), pp. 461–80, on p. 467.

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Some respondents recalled that this lack of knowledge persisted until marriage. Tessie (b.1938) told me 'Hadn't a clue. We were thick as planks, I swear to God, getting married. We truly hadn't a clue'. Likewise, Aoife (b.1947) told me 'once we were married, we had no idea how to do intercourse – no idea'. Ann (b.1945) similarly expressed the view 'Now that was the sex side of it. And it was … oh I don't know … it was like leading a lamb to slaughter'. Kate Fisher has suggested in her study of birth control practices in early twentieth-century Britain, that 'Women were not only more sheltered from the subcultures in which sexual information was spread but they also censored themselves, preferring to play an ignorant role'.[28] In the case of my study, however, men also commonly professed to a lack of knowledge around sex and family planning in their younger years. Ronan (b.1933) told me 'No, I hardly knew anything about the woman's period until I got married. […] And my mother sent me up to the priest to get instructions.'

Lack of knowledge could extend to pregnancy and childbirth. Clodagh (b.1940) told me 'You weren't sure what way you were having this baby though.' Martina (b.1955) speaking to me about her first pregnancy and childbirth experience, told me 'I mean, it sounds crazy now when I say that but in actual fact, no idea. And even when I went in to have that baby, I still had no idea of what the procedure was.' Likewise, Elaine (b.1950) said that she knew 'Very little. Very little. It was ridiculous. What they know now, I think I had a second child before I knew it. You know? The first one was such a shock. I didn't know what was happening to me.' Sarah (b.1947) also recalled a friend's experience: 'Her waters broke, she didn't have a clue what … she never knew about the waters breaking, and this kind of thing.'

Contemporary publications also referred to this lack of knowledge. In 1965, 'Marriage counsellor' in *Woman's Way* magazine stated that 'many young girls and boys actually reach the altar without any sound knowledge of sex' and stressed that it was the responsibility of parents to impart knowledge to their children.[29] The article provided clear guidance on how to provide sex education to children and advised parents who felt shy around the issue not to neglect their duty in this regard.[30] Parents were, however, often reticent to talk to their children about the facts of life. Instead, some parents would explain the birth of a new child by saying they were found under a cabbage plant, or other

[28] Fisher, *Birth Control*, p. 75.
[29] 'Marriage counsellor: telling them the facts of life', *Womans' Way*, 3 September 1965, 21.
[30] *Ibid.*

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analogies. Diane's (b.1949) parents owned a fish shop in a small town in the north of the country and they explained to her that her younger sister 'came in with the salmon – we used to get salmon in boxes, and we found Mary in the salmon, that's where Mary came from.' Diane felt that although her mother 'was a very modern, go-ahead woman, she would have been very reticent about sex and contraception and the rest of it, it was all hush-hush, and it was because of the Catholic Church, of course'. Mary Anne (b.1955) similarly recalled, 'I think I was told I was gotten through a cabbage plant'. Instead of clear guidance, parents tended to make opaque statements. I asked Emer (b.1939) if her mother told her anything about how people got pregnant and she said, 'My mother said not a word, she said, "You'll learn soon enough".' Similarly, Teresa (b.1946) from a small village in the south-west said 'Oh no sexual education, not at all, it was "soon enough" and no. "Soon enough", even with your periods, my mother didn't even talk about it, do, you know, what she said, "You'd be better off not to know", like that kind of'. Similarly, Angela Davis has suggested that for women growing up in the 1920s and 1930s in England, topics such as sex and childbirth were 'taboo' subjects which were not discussed within most families and that this reticence around discussion of sexual topics 'cast a long shadow into the 1960s'.[31]

Participants in Máire Leane's study, which involved interviews with 21 Irish women born between 1914 and 1955, also referred to vague warnings issued by parents which only served to cause confusion.[32] The majority of individuals in my study also recalled parents' embarrassment in addressing issues around sex, and terms such as 'be careful' and 'mind yourself' were often used in place of explaining what behaviour their teenage or young adult children should be avoiding. These statements could be read as an assumption that their children knew what they were referring to with these warning. However, many of the interviewees did not know at the time what these warnings actually meant. Richard (b.1954) remembered 'Just my father said to be careful and just a few words but really very little'. Hannah (b.1950) told me 'My mother never spoke to me, only, "Be careful".' Similarly, Dennis (b.1937) recalled coming back from a tour of Killarney with his girlfriend and his mother saying to him 'She said "I hope", she says, "you were good"', which he did not understand. Virginia (b.1948) likewise remembered: 'You were told to be careful, but you didn't know what be careful meant. (laughing)

[31] Angela Davis, '"Oh no, nothing, we didn't learn anything": sex education and the preparation of girls for motherhood, *c*.1930–1970', *History of Education*, 37:5, (2008), pp. 661–77, on pp. 667–8.
[32] Leane, 'Embodied sexualities', p. 33.

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You know? You didn't know what they were telling you'. Mairead (b.1953) remembered 'We wouldn't have had much sex education. My mother used to say "Keep your knees together". Things like this'. Mary Anne (b.1955) also recalled being given the same advice by her mother but not understanding it:

> 'Oh, mind yourself'. Me being green as grass, 'What you mean mind yourself? Mind yourself walking down the street, what? Mind yourself, what?' And so a hundred years afterward I knew what she meant, 'Mind yourself'. Mind yourself, don't get pregnant.

Some respondents who grew up on farms explained that they learnt from observing animals. Christopher (b.1946) from the rural south-east, for instance, told me 'I think the advantage of coming from let's say a farm background is that you have seen the – in let's say the dairying or the animal and you have seen let's say the reproductive process'. Likewise, Katherine (b.1948) who also grew up on a farm explained 'As a kid, you're out, you're holding poor horses for this, and that, and the other thing. And you're … There's a stallion around, and you're … You know. You're very … I suppose you're, you're open, like I mean, very open to it'. Similarly, Bernadette (b.1947) explained:

> I don't know how I knew, but I did know. But I grew up on a farm, and you knew. I mean you saw the bull servicing the cow. This is very crude now. You saw the boar being brought to service the sow. You saw all this going on. The vet came, and the vet helped if there was a calf being born, and we'd be told to go in when the vet … but of course, we wouldn't go in. We would go, we'd go into some shed and we'd peep around the corner, and we'd see the calf coming out, and we'd see all that. As we got older, then we were probably there anyway, you know?

Interestingly in Bernadette's testimony, she was told by her parents to go back into the house when the vet arrived so that she would not see the calf being born, suggesting that her parents wanted to shield her from this aspect of the reproductive process.

Shame and secrecy also surrounded the pregnant body. As Máire Leane has shown, 'the construction of the pregnant body as offensive to the public gaze impacted on pregnant women in very concrete ways'.[33] In fact, as Jennifer Redmond and Judith Hartford have argued 'revulsion towards the female, fertile, sexualised body in the classroom appears to have contributed to the rationale' for the 1932 marriage ban.[34] Women

[33] Leane, 'Embodied sexualities', p. 46.
[34] Judith Hartford and Jennifer Redmond, '"I am amazed at how easily we accepted it": the marriage ban, teaching and ideologies of womanhood in post-Independence Ireland', *Gender and Education*, (2019), pp. 194–5.

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in Leane's study recalled that during pregnancy they consciously excluded themselves from public spaces and wore loose-fitting coats when they went out.[35] Similarly, in my study, some respondents recalled how the condition of pregnancy was often hidden. Elaine (b.1950) recalled how when she was pregnant and she was going into town, her mother would tell her '"Put on a looser coat, will you? Put a looser coat on you". You know, it was totally hidden'. Similarly, Myra (b.1947) remembered 'If you saw someone who was pregnant, "what's wrong with them?" "Mind your own business". They didn't say oh, they're having a baby. We were very innocent'.

Given the lack of formal sex education in most Irish secondary schools and the fact that a lot of parents tended to be hesitant to talk to their children about the facts of life, the main way of finding out information was through peers, the media or in the case of young women, through magazines. Eamonn (b.1933) from the rural south-west said, 'Never mentioned by the parents. You learnt that in bits and pieces around the fields or maybe at football matches or wherever. You picked it up and sometimes you never learned'. Dennis (b.1937) found out the facts of life from a cousin. He explained, 'No, I didn't find out till I was about 14. It was my cousin who told me one day. I said, "Ah, you're joking." (laughs). I didn't believe him'. Similarly, Nora (b.1940) told me 'No, you did not. Not very much anyway, girl. Only what you read or what your friends told you. It's the same as your periods, nobody even told you about them really'. Brigid (b.1945) from a small town in the south-west received some information from her older cousins: 'They were filling me in, so I was never ignorant of the facts, I'd say. Quite early on I was well aware of what was going on. Talk in school, that was how I learned'. Bernadette (b.1947) who grew up in the rural west of Ireland also recalled finding out from a neighbour. She said 'Well, my first information about where babies come from was from a girl who lived next door. She was one of the wild ones that ended up going to England. But she told me, she said, "They come out of there", pointing to her navel. I always remembered that, but of course, she was wee. Someone must have told her that'. Jean (b.1953) who grew up in a small town in the north of the country explained 'In my case, it was my older sisters, Anne's just a year older than me. And she had a friend. We just lived in council houses, we were all very friendly. But there was a load of children at that stage. And it was her older sister told us. Told her, and told us'.

[35] Leane, 'Embodied sexualities', p. 46.

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However, peer-learning meant that urban myths and misinformation could be spread. Mary Ellen (b.1944) from the rural west of Ireland felt that because young men and women were getting their information from 'reading books or conversing between each other and that', that individuals 'often times they got the wrong slant about it'. Úna (b.1944) recalled an incident with her first boyfriend when she was aged 17: 'I was after getting a tooth out and I wouldn't let him kiss me, in case I became pregnant'. Paula (b.1955) from a town in the west of Ireland recalled an encounter with a boy where he 'Really liked me so dragged me down a lane and started kissing me and started moving his body against me and stuff'. Following the encounter:

> Oh, I was in convulsions. I remember telling my friends at school. I said, 'Oh, I'm afraid I might be pregnant'. And I was age 14 definitely, if not 15. So I wouldn't have … That's how naïve I was. I didn't know that you actually had to engage in sexual intercourse to be pregnant. That's just one memory I have of back then.

Paula also recalled anxiety about kissing and the idea that certain types of kisses could lead to pregnancy:

> 'Cause if you French kissed, you could get pregnant. You know? You had this ridiculous idea. You were quite anxious about all these things. And kept it at a certain level. You know? And yeah. So, that was me anyway. Wasn't everyone? But it was me.

2.2 Sex Education Booklets for Adolescents

A small number of sex education booklets were published in the 1950s and 1960s with guidance for young men and women about questions of sex. The earliest of these appear to have been two publications from the 1950s written by Rev. Thomas Anthony Finnegan. Finnegan (1925–2011) was ordained as a priest in 1951 and served as a chaplain of St. Angela's College, Sligo, before going on to become Junior Dean of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, and later bishop of Killala, Co. Mayo from 1987–2002. His first publication, *The Boy's Own: A Practical Booklet for Teenage Boys* (1954) first appeared as a series in the Marist Fathers' monthly publication *Our Lady's Family* before being collated for publication together. *The Boy's Own* dealt primarily with issues of sexual morality such as purity, bad thoughts and bad language, and framed these themes in the context of sin. A section on Bad Actions explored 'sexual powers' and 'sexual pleasure'. Finnegan emphasised that 'this pleasure is permitted only in marriage, because it is only in marriage that children may be brought into the world. That is God's law, and deliberately to go against

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it is very seriously sinful, even if only in thought'.[36] The book went on to say 'the devil will try to get you into the habit of sin, because he knows that bad habits are often hard to overcome. In this matter you must be very manly', and suggested that if the reader had difficulties or questions, they should ask their father or priest.[37] Readers were advised to avoid temptation against purity through prayer and other activities, avoidance of bad companions and frequent attendance at Mass and Holy Communion, every morning if possible. Again, the trope of manliness was reiterated with the author stating 'Jesus will make a man of you, strong with His own strength'.[38] Girls were to be treated with utmost respect and it was the young man's responsibility to protect their virtue.[39] The book contained no information on the physiology of sexual intercourse and reproduction but focused its attention on the moral aspects of sex.

The *Boy's Own* was followed up with a 1966 publication by Finnegan called *The Girl's Own: Questions Young Women Ask*. In contrast with his earlier publication, *The Girl's Own* contained much more frank discussion of issues around love and romance, dating and 'troublesome thoughts'. The book was written in an accessible question and answer format. This book, like its predecessor, followed Catholic codes of sexual morality and emphasised that sexual activity should only take place within marriage. In the section on kissing, for instance, readers were advised that 'passionate kissing and embracing – which are designed by God to prepare for this act – can properly take place only in marriage. That is the reason why such kissing and embracing are mortally sinful for the unmarried'.[40] Chastity and modesty were encouraged, and girls were warned to avoid boys with 'low moral standards' and immature young boys.[41] Such ideas were not unusual in Irish society at the time and some interviewees felt that women had the responsibility to maintain chastity in a relationship. Nicholas (b.1953) felt that 'the onus was wholly on the woman not to engage in sexual acts. That's the way I see it. Of course, it sounds a bit rough. But men pursued and the women managed the situation'. Similarly, Sandra (b.1951) recalled her father telling her 'Women are the keepers of male morals'. In Sandra's view 'This is what he used to say. And in those days, women kind of took on that role.'

Aidan Mackey's 1965 publication *What Is Love?* was a guide aimed to be given by parents to their adolescent children. The foreword explained that the book dealt with questions such as 'Why do people get married?'

[36] T.A. Finnegan, *The Boy's Own: A Practical Booklet for Teenage Boys* (1954), p. 15.
[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16. [38] *Ibid.*, p. 16. [39] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[40] T.A. Finnegan, *The Girl's Own: Questions Young Women Ask* (1966), p. 12.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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and 'What exactly is "falling in love"?'. While the book did not claim to give information about 'sex…or about how sex works…It will help you to avoid wrong ideas and actions which could do a great deal of harm to you – harm which could last all your life.'[42] Adolescence was described as a time 'of excitement and adventure and discovery. It is also a time of some danger'.[43] Young people were warned not to act on their impulses. In particular, this advice was aimed the young girl who allowed boys to 'take liberties' or 'paw her'. Mackey wrote that 'Girls who cheapen themselves in this way are not admired or respected by boys. You can judge that from the names which boys give to such girls', these included 'second-hand', 'shop-soiled' and 'fly-blown'.[44] Readers were encouraged to avoid 'impurity' and to only use the 'gifts' God had given them 'for the right reasons and at the right time, and do not waste and spoil them by meddling before you are old enough and knowledgeable enough to understand and enjoy them as God meant them to be enjoyed'.[45]

By the late 1960s, a sex education booklet called *My Dear Daughter* published by the Sisters of Notre Dame in Liverpool was being used in some girls' schools and was often recommended by agony aunt Angela Macnamara to girls who wrote in to her columns requesting information on the facts of life. The book, like others, tended to focus on issues of morality. Paula (b.1955) from a town in the west of Ireland recalled the book being taught at her school:

> We had a thing called *My Dear Daughter*, that the nun would do with us. And it would be common. You know? And somebody would come around to give a lecture. And I absolutely hated it. And every girl in my class hated it because it was all cloaked. A big issue was made out of it before it happened. Oh, so and so is coming. So you started to get stressed about buzz words been mentioned that were taboo words that weren't mentioned and yet were mentioned and you thought well, what detail is going to be gone into? It was all spoken around in a way, you know? But you never got a clear, concise informative picture of things.

As several historians have shown, Irish agony aunt, Angela Macnamara became an important voice on the issue of sex education in the 1960s.[46] Macnamara provided talks to girls at convent schools in Dublin on issues such as 'company-keeping', dating and courtship.[47] Paul Ryan's engaging study of Macnamara's agony aunt column in the *Evening Press* from 1963–1980 shows how her column 'was one of the few sources of

[42] Aidan Mackey, *What Is Love? A Guide to Right Attitudes to Love and Sex for Children and Younger Adolescents*, (1965) p. 4.
[43] *What is Love?* p. 11. [44] *Ibid.*, p. 13. [45] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
[46] See: Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth*, pp. 130–2; Catriona Clear, Paul Ryan.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

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sexual information in Ireland especially during the 1960s'.[48] For Ryan, 'Macnamara's power lay in the monopoly of information about sex that she held over a section of the population, particularly in 1960s Ireland'.[49] Caitriona Clear's study of women's magazines in 1950s and 1960s Ireland shows how Macnamara provided vital information for girls and women of all ages on a variety of issues.[50] Macnamara's book *Living and Loving* was published in 1969 with the aim, in her own words, of helping readers 'reason out for yourself the good and responsible attitude Christians should adopt towards dating and courtship'.[51] Sexual activity was defined as something that should only occur within marriage, with Macnamara suggesting that uncontrolled 'desire to express love in physical terms' would result in chaos, warning of the danger of pregnancy and that 'babies would be born whom nobody wanted, and for whom there would be no secure home'.[52] Young men and women were advised to exercise the utmost self-control and to avoid 'petting' which was 'objectively wrong because it is a loveless act when it can lead easily to remorse, guilt and frustration'.[53] Unlike other earlier guides, a clear explanation of how conception occurs (between a husband and wife) was provided.[54] The dangers of pregnancy outside marriage were also dwelled on by Macnamara as a warning. She wrote:

> A girl who is aware that her behaviour with her boyfriend is too passionate should test her reactions by supposing that she actually had the misfortune to become pregnant by him. Think exactly what the results would be: She is now responsible for the life of another human being. Could she tell her parents, and what way would they react? What of relations, teachers, neighbours? It is no good her blaming anyone else. She knew the possible consequence of the risks she was taking.[55]

Menstruation, seminal emission and masturbation were also explained in depth. Young women were advised of the importance of modesty.[56] The key methods of contraception were listed (surgical sterilisation, drugs, interrupted intercourse, use of the diaphragm, use of the condom, use of the coil, the infertile period) but it was noted that all contraception was forbidden by the Catholic Church although 'responsible family planning is encouraged'.[57] Only the infertile period was described in depth.

[48] Paul Ryan, *Asking Angela Macnamara: An Intimate History of Irish Lives* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), pp. 204–5.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 197. [50] Clear, pp. 81–93.
[51] Angela Macnamara, *Living and Loving*, (Veritas Publications, 1969), p. 3.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 9. [53] *Ibid.*, p. 13. [54] *Ibid.*, p. 12. [55] *Ibid.*, p. 27. [56] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[57] Macnamara, *Living and Loving*, p. 37.

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In some cases, and particularly for the younger members of the cohort, parents provided their children with booklets such as the above. Pól (b.1948) explained to me that he was taught nothing in school but recalled his father's embarrassment as he 'threw a book at me, you know, "What every boy should know", sure I can figure it out'. Judith (b.1955) who grew up in Dublin, recalled being given a booklet on the facts of life by her mother 'But no conversation. Just said, "Here. Read that"'. Judith told me of the booklet:

> But of course all I saw on the top was 'for girls'. So immediately I wanted to know what was 'for boys'. So I went rooting in her room. And found the booklet she had. And it was, I suppose, for the parent to talk with – and then there was a section for boys and a section for girls. Of course, I got out the section for boys and read it.

Jacinta (b.1954) who also grew up in Dublin had a similar experience. Aged nine, she found a booklet in her mother's bedside locker with

> A girl's side and a boy's side and I read the whole lot. It didn't mean much to me because I didn't really understand. When I was ten, she gave me the girl's side with the boy's side ripped out. I'd already read both. I thought it was funny. What to expect. It doesn't mean a lot to you at the time, its pre- it happening.

2.3 Women's Magazines and the Media

Carole Holohan has argued that while the Catholic Church continued to 'exert significant moral influence over the lives of the majority Catholic population', the 1960s marked 'something of a turning point' as the print media began to openly discuss the topic of sex.[58] Women's magazines were an important source of information for many young women on the basic facts of life, but also on contraception. Writing in the magazine *Woman's Way* in 1964, editor Sean O'Sullivan lamented that 'even today, untold hundreds of thousands of people get married and except for what HE has picked up from the gutter or learned the hard way in Confession, they don't know any more about the facts of life, marriage or sex than Mammy or Daddy did'.[59] Articles on family planning, which were frequently published in the magazine, highlight significant ignorance among young women. In 1978, for example, Clare, aged 22 (described as a secretary and single with a six-year-old daughter) explained, 'I regret not having known more about family planning when I was younger. I was just

[58] Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth,* p. 128.
[59] 'By the way', *Woman's Way,* 14 June 1964, p. 10.

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sixteen and doing my Leaving Certificate when I was five months pregnant'.[60] Similarly, Cora, a 19-year-old student explained 'I've been studying in Dublin for over a year now and find attitudes very different from what they are at home. I went to a convent school and sex was only briefly mentioned in the biology class, but we were told nothing about family planning'.[61]

Indeed, the regularity with which letters relating to the basic facts of life were published suggests that many remained truly ignorant about basic physiology. Caitriona Clear has argued that the problems in Angela Macnamara's columns were genuine and suggests that the fact that Macnamara usually had at 'least one obliquely worded "answer only" problem' in her page suggests the page's authenticity.[62] Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, due to the growing popularity of problem pages, Macnamara and other Irish agony aunts struggled to keep up with their correspondence.[63] Clear's analysis of the problem pages of *Woman's Way* magazine between 1963 and 1969 has shown that out of 1,186 letters to the magazine, 31.5% concerned sex education/information, 30.9% concerned courtship (not sex), 13.8% dealt with 'miscellaneous', 10.8% with extended family/parent-child, 6.7% were questions about work/education and 6.3% were concerned with marital conflict.[64] As Clear has shown, Angela Macnamara was 'unequivocally opposed to artificial methods of birth control for married, and it need hardly be added, for single people', holding this view throughout the 1960s and modifying it slightly in later life.[65] Yet, she was also wary about recommending natural methods of family planning.[66] The young people's magazine *New Spotlight* dealt with issues relating to sexuality in its problem pages in the 1960s and 1970s, with responses to more sensitive issues being published in the 'P.S.' section without the original letter. Many letters revealed considerable ignorance regarding sexual matters.[67] As in Clear's study of women's magazines, many of the letters from young people writing for advice from *New Spotlight* were 'coded or direct requests for moral/religious judgement'.[68]

Magazines were clearly an important source of knowledge for young women. Sarah (b.1947) explained that in the absence of information from her mother, she 'kind of more less read magazines, or books, those kinds of thing'. Judith (b.1950) felt that she gleaned a lot of her sex

[60] 'The pill generation', *Woman's Way*, 22 September 1978, p. 11.
[61] *Ibid.*, 22 September 1978, p. 12. [62] Clear, *Women's Voices*, pp. 27–8.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 28. [64] *Ibid.*, p. 82. [65] *Ibid.*, p. 89. [66] *Ibid.*
[67] Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth*, pp. 133–4.
[68] Clear, *Women's Voices*, p. 115 cited in: Holohan, p. 136.

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education from magazines, stating, 'You know they had magazines. Generally I think that's where you get lots of your information from. The problem page. Or articles. Probably mainly English magazines like *Woman* and *Woman's Own*'. Noreen, (b.1954) also recalled:

> And probably what I do remember, maybe more my sexual … sex education from, I remember getting a hold of these magazines called *True Love* magazines in that time. Sure they were all just raunchy stuff, you know? It was probably innocent raunchy stuff by what's exposed nowadays, but it was new to me. So you would pick it up from magazines.

Letters to Angela Macnamara's agony aunt column highlight the lack of knowledge among young people. In 1964, a woman wrote to Macnamara stating that she had become pregnant outside marriage. She explained, 'I was never told anything about how babies are conceived and though I sensed that our love-making was too intense, I did not dream that we could so easily go too far'.[69] Similarly, 'Westside Story' writing in 1966, stated:

> I am 17 and don't know the first thing about the facts of life. I think it's a disgrace. I know you give talks in girls' schools, but our school is in the back of beyond, and they haven't got round to seeing the wisdom in having a straight-speaking married woman in to talk to us. Of course I know odds and ends, but I'd feel so insecure going on a date that I'd be terrified to accept one. Naturally our class are interested in boys, but you'd die if you heard the garbled versions we have of love and life. Can you help us by suggesting books?

Macnamara suggested the book *My Dear Daughter*, as well as *Dating for Young Catholics* by Monsignor Kelly and *Modern Youth and Chastity* by Father Gerald Kelly, but emphasised that giving children books was not adequate, and that girls and boys required 'discussions with understanding, frank adults'.[70] Some letters to magazines from young people show that not all Irish girls and women were willing to accept traditional Catholic and moral teachings. 'Teenage Girl' writing in 1965 asked, 'Isn't it unfair that Catholics are expected to have as many children as possible? Why is this so?' In her reply, Macnamara stated 'It is *not* so', and argued that parents had a duty not only to bring children into the world but to ensure that they were properly educated and provided for. Macnamara stated that the number of children could be regulated through abstinence from sexual intercourse.[71]

[69] 'Angela Macnamara's letters page', *Woman's Way,* 30 June 1964, p. 49.
[70] 'Can you help me?', *Woman's Way,* 23 September 1966, p. 34.
[71] *Ibid.*, first fortnight February 1966, p. 49.

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Television had an important impact in disseminating information about contraception. By 1963, there were 150,000 television licence holders in the Republic of Ireland. Imported programmes from Britain were more likely to normalise sexual themes and address issues such as contraception and unmarried motherhood, and even before the advent of Telefís Éireann, some parts of the country received transmissions from BBC and ITV.[72] The advent of The Late Late Show, hosted by Gay Byrne from 1962, also meant that more 'controversial' issues began to be discussed on Irish national television.[73] In March 1971, Byrne dedicated an entire episode to the theme of 'Women's Liberation', with a panel consisting of Irish Women's Liberation Movement members Mary Kenny, Máirín Johnston and Nell McCafferty as well as Senator Mary Robinson, Maynooth lecturer Mary Cullen and television producer Leila Doolan. Following the Contraceptive Train in May 1971, Mary Kenny appeared again on The Late Late Show with Colette O'Neill. Kenny 'held up the condoms for the TV camera (discreetly wrapped in their packets, and not inflated)'.[74]

Many respondents pointed to The Late Late Show as being crucial in opening up discussion of more controversial issues such as contraception. Diane (b.1949) remembered 'The time that Gay Byrne interviewed people about contraception, The Late Late Show was very … it was our great means of communication and getting information'. Mary Ellen (b.1944) felt:

> It was really with The Late Late Show on television that things opened up because Gay Byrne used to have lots of interviewees like that. He'd discuss … they would discuss issues that were unheard of being discussed on TV and people were watching the Late Late, very much so at that time. So it encouraged people to talk more openly about those issues. Before that it was a taboo.

Mairead (b.1953) felt that Gay Byrne 'brought it [sex] out in the open, people would never talk about anything'. Carol (b.1954) also felt that The Late Late Show had significant influence, because 'it had a wide appeal to people and a wide audience and it did bring the topics that people just didn't discuss, that were taboo with them'. A number of respondents also recalled the 1987 episode of The Late Late Show when Gay Byrne showed a condom on television. Nicholas (b.1953) from a city in the west of Ireland stated, 'Gay Byrne was the first to introduce a condom onto the television on The Late Late Show. So, whether, whether that was a good

[72] Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth*, p. 131.
[73] For detailed discussion of The Late Late Show see: Finola Doyle-O'Neill, *The Gaybo Revolution: How Gay Byrne Challenged Irish Society* (Dublin: Orpen Press, 2015).
[74] Mary Kenny, *Something of Myself and Others* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2013), p. 155.

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or a bad thing the one thing that was definite about it was that it was controversial'. For Aoife (b.1947) who also watched the episode, 'that was the first time I ever saw a condom or heard what it was called'.

2.4 The Impact of Religion on Attitudes to Sex

Religion was a significant part of the lives of respondents growing up. Clodagh (b.1940) for example, explained:

> Well, we were brought up you see as they say that was our life you see you were brought to church, of course it was Catholic school, got First Communion, Confirmation, you never questioned anything, that was life and you believed everything you were told.

Catholicism inevitably had an impact on attitudes to sex. Several participants recalled how they felt that physical intimacy was a sinful activity. Áine (b.1949) explained 'you always got the vibe that, you know, sex was dirty, filthy'. Such ideas stemmed from Church teachings growing up. Marian (b.1935) explained to me, 'If a fella put his hand on your knee it was nearly a sin. That kind of thing. Kissing was about the nearest you got to … but of course when I met my husband I knew he was the one. There was a lot of pressure. I think that's why we probably got married … everybody got married young and you had all this in your head. No you don't do this, you don't do that, kind of thing. It was a sin…'. The perceived sinfulness of physical activity meant that many individuals were afraid to engage in physical intimacy as adolescents. Eugene (b.1939) explained 'you'd be afraid to put your hand on a girl's… at that time. You'd be shy about it. You'd be very slow'. When I asked him why this was, Eugene explained, 'Ah sure the priest. They were all – the clergy you know'. He then went on to recall a dance in his area where 'a neighbour of mine was dancing real tight and he came over to him and tapped him on the shoulder.' Indeed, many interviewees recalled similar incidents where sexual activity was policed by priests. Pól (b.1948) who grew up in a small town in the west of Ireland felt that:

> it was all sinful, you know what I mean? It was sin, it was sin and French kissing was a mortal sin. Kissing with closed lips was a venial sin. Because you didn't know where … what did the priest say once to me? If a girl opened her mouth and you kissed her God knows where it would lead to.

As Louise Fuller has shown, in the 1950s, there was a range of devotional Catholic activities. These included the Holy Hour, Benediction, the Forty Hours, confraternities, sodalities, novenas, processions, missions, the cult of indulgences, Lenten fast and abstinence and exercises of

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mortification, First Friday devotions, confession and the rosary.[75] By the 1970s, some of these activities had become less popular or were de-emphasised by the Church. For the majority of the participants in my study, however, most of whom were coming of age from the 1950s to the late 1960s, these activities had an important impact on their psyche. Hazel Lyder found that many of the women in her study of female sexuality during childhood in 1930s and 1940s Dublin recalled 'strong, if oblique, messages being given about sexual morality on these occasions'.[76] Retreats led by redemptorist priests were recalled by a number of oral history participants. Dennis (b.1937) from the south-west of the country described the annual retreat in his village in the 1950s as follows:

> In our village, we'd have an annual retreat. You know what those things are? The missioners would come in and the missioners were Redemptorists mostly. There'd be hell … and the women were one week, the men were another. They weren't even in the church together and there'd be hell. The whole moral situation, of bad company keeping, sex and all that was pounded. There were other things. Don't get me wrong, stealing and lying and cheating. All those things were also part of the regime. But the sex thing was the one that … There would be a night devoted to company keeping and that would be the … That was the 50s.

Bob (b.1931) also recalled the missions as follows:

> I remember from the Redemptorists and hellfire on the… we all were terrified about this. Young girl and look at you rotting in the grave now or something, she's damned to hell and this kind of fire and brimstone kind of sermons at that time. Terrified people.

Declan (b.1944) who was younger than Bob and Dennis, also recalled the missions in his parish in the 1950s and early 1960s. He remembered an annual lecture 'it was always a Tuesday night, that was the sex, the lectures on sex then'. Declan recalled, 'it was all about sex and company and all that'. Lizzie (b.1946) also recalled the missioners who would come to their parish, 'and they'd be up there. I mean, everything was adultery, and everything was a mortal sin. And I mean if you only have looked at your neighbour's husband, it nearly was adultery'. Úna (b.1944) also recalled the fear that she felt attending missions, reflecting on the power of the priests at the time, 'I mean you were afraid of your life with the priests'. For Úna this fear persisted even after marriage. She recalled the fear she felt around having sex for the first time on her honeymoon:

[75] Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002), p. 224.
[76] Lyder, 'Silence and secrecy', p. 79.

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And I was giving him plenty of time, so that he'd be in bed and then I came out, I sat on the side of the bed. He knew I was nervous, but … Oh yes, because I was always kind of made afraid and then there used to be missioners, missionary priests and they'd be banging the pulpit and you were going to go to hell. I mean, at that time. We were brainwashed.

Even though Úna was doing nothing wrong in terms of Catholic teachings around sex, it is clear from the above quote that the Church's stance around sexual morality exacerbated her feelings of apprehension about having sex for the first time. Her use of the term 'brainwashed' was not unusual from my respondents either; many of whom reflected candidly on their adherence to Catholic teachings as young people in contrast to their changed views in older age.

Several interviewees recalled priests giving talks to them at school about the dangers of sexual activity. Maud (b.1947) remembered her class at school having a talk from a priest at the age of 15 or 16. She explained: 'They'd come into the convent and you couldn't speak. But they, in their own way tried to talk to you about sex'. Her main memory of the talk was being told, 'I remember that French kissing. Never, never kiss. Never let a boy kiss you. French kissing was a real sin'. Although certain activities were deemed to be wrong or sinful, respondents expressed their confusion at the time and lack of understanding of what they were being told. Martin (b.1952) from a town in the south-east of Ireland recalled:

One of the chief dangers to chastity was company keeping. Now they didn't tell us what chastity was, we just supposed it was a very bad thing. But also, they didn't tell us what company keeping meant. So, all I knew was that my father worked for a company. The whole family was doomed, kind of. Everything was skirted around. I just knew that if you went there you were in serious trouble.

Sexuality and company keeping were policed in other ways. Alice (b.1944) from the rural west of Ireland recalled, 'The priests used to go to the carnivals, and you had to keep a safe distance'. In a 1988 account, Evelyn Owens (1931–2010), the Labour Party politician and trade union activist, described how at the age when she and her peers were 'interested in boys or boys were interested in us', they would meet at the crossroads of Vernon Avenue and Belgrove Road in Dublin on the way home from school. She said: 'We had a local curate who was very anti the idea of boys and girls talking. So the big trick was not to get caught by Fr O'Keeffe on his bicycle coming home in the evening. If you did you jumped over a garden wall and hid. That was our introduction to company keeping'.[77]

[77] Mairin Johnston, *Dublin Belles: Conversations with Dublin Women* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1988), p. 113.

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Confession helped to induce fear in young men and women.[78] The practice was also used by priests to help to reinforce the idea that sexual activity was sinful. Carol (b.1954) recalled a priest in her area in Dublin when she was growing up 'who would have frightened the life out of you. You'd hear him roaring out of the confessional box'. Hugh (b.1951) felt 'you assumed most people weren't having sex. We were brought up in such a repressive attitude that it was a mortal sin to have any sort of sexual encounters, if you had any sort of thing that you did do at all, you were forced to confess it'. Lizzie (b.1946) recalled going to confession aged 17 after her first kiss, telling the priest that she had committed a mortal sin. Dennis (b.1937) remembered the following experience in confession which clearly had a significant impact on him:

> But I remember there was a cracked priest, anyway, but he was fairly strong on a mission, whatever, but going to confession and I went to confession to him, you see. I said, 'I committed bad actions'. 'What did you do?' 'I put my hand up a girl's leg'. He nearly went ape. Because I was leading her to hell and I was leading myself to hell and … I didn't put my hand on a girl's knee for a long time after that.

Guilt around physical intimacy could extend into other areas of sexual pleasure. Julie (b.1947) from the rural west of Ireland candidly told me, 'But I remember, I suppose teenage years, you're, I remember actually lying in bed in the night and just wanting to experience, to arouse myself and then feeling so guilty'. And, as other testimonies in Chapter 5 will show, such guilt in relation to sex often persisted into adulthood.

2.5 The Stigma and Shame of Unmarried Motherhood

For much of the twentieth century, sex outside of marriage was strongly condemned and there was significant stigma towards this as well as unmarried motherhood and marriage breakdown in Ireland. In Clara Fischer's words, shame 'was mobilized in the pursuit of a postcolonial national identity, which centrally hinged on the moral purity of women, on the one hand, but was promoted and maintained alongside constructions of women and women's potential sexual transgressions as continuous threats to that identity, on the other'.[79] Sara Ahmed defines shame as 'an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels

[78] Cara Delay, *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism, 1850–1950*, pp. 84–6.
[79] Clara Fischer, 'Gender, nation, and the politics of shame: Magdalen laundries and the institutionalization of feminine transgression in modern Ireland', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41:4, (2016), pp. 821–43, on p. 824.

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about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body'.[80] Furthermore 'to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others *as* shame'.[81] The 1937 constitution defined women's role in Irish society as subsidiary to the institution of the family. For a woman who found herself pregnant outside of marriage, there were limited options – marriage to the father, emigration to Britain to have the baby in secret and give it up for adoption, or, in the majority of cases, seek assistance from a mother and baby home.[82] As Lindsey Earner-Byrne has argued, the shotgun wedding 'was a strategy of survival for many women facing single motherhood in Ireland'.[83] From the state's perspective, this was a cost-effective approach to the problem of unmarried motherhood as 'upon marriage the illegitimate child became the responsibility of the father rather than the state' but as well as this 'society was more forgiving of mothers who sought to legitimise their mistake by marriage, even if that marriage took place shortly before or after the birth'.[84] In 1988, journalist Nuala O'Faolain articulated the lack of options facing women who became pregnant outside marriage in the early 1960s, writing, 'There was no contraception or nobody knew about contraception. It was just your tough luck if you got pregnant. If you got pregnant you had to marry the bloke. You just *had* to. If the woman's boyfriend did not want to marry her, the only other option was to have the baby adopted'.[85] As well as shotgun weddings or adoption, some unmarried mothers had their children adopted by a relative. We know in other instances that shame and stigma was so strong that some women resorted to illegal abortion or infanticide.[86] Only one of my participants, Alice (b.1944) from a rural part of Ireland, mentioned an attempt to bring on an abortion on one occasion when, as a single woman, her period was late, and she believed she was pregnant. One common way women used to bring on an abortion was by drinking gin and having a hot bath. She recalled:

> I've never told this either to anybody. Somebody told me that if you had gin to have an abortion, I bought a bottle of gin and put it into the bath, to the bath. I didn't know you had to drink it. […] Thank god I wasn't pregnant anyway.

Alice's account here highlights how knowledge about how to procure an abortion could be misinterpreted, but also her relief at not being pregnant.

[80] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 103
[81] *Ibid.* [82] Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, pp. 179–80. [83] *Ibid.*, p. 180.
[84] *Ibid.*. [85] Johnston, *Dublin Belles*, p. 61.
[86] On illegal abortion, see Delay, 'Pills, potions, and purgatives' and 'Kitchens and kettles'. On infanticide see: Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do?* and Farrell, *A Most Diabolical Deed*.

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From 1968 onwards, with the introduction of the 1967 Abortion Act in Britain (with the exception of Northern Ireland), Irish women began to travel to have abortions there. We know that in 1968, 64 Irish residents travelled to have legal abortions in England and Wales, with this figure doubling each year up until 1972.[87] As Lindsey Earner-Byrne has shown, at a 1974 conference organised by Cherish, it was stated that 43 per cent of pregnancies of unmarried Irish women between the ages of 25 and 29 were terminated in England, compared to 29 per cent of their English counterparts, suggesting that for many young Irish women, 1970s Ireland was not a viable place to be a single mother.[88] Arguably, due to the significant stigma and lack of adequate state support, single motherhood was not a feasible option for the majority until at least the 1990s.[89]

In Britain, levels of stigma and shame directed towards unmarried mothers depended on the character of local communities and cultures, but Melanie Tebbutt suggests that it was 'less pronounced among the generation born after 1945' even as teenage pregnancy became a new focus of moral concern.[90] Pat Thane suggests that in England, the myth of the permissive society in the 1960s overestimates the extent of change that took place in Britain in this period, and while there was more openness towards the discussion of unmarried mothers, this change was 'slow, uneven, and contested'.[91] In Ireland, however, the stigma of unmarried motherhood persisted until late into the twentieth century and fear of pregnancy outside of marriage had a significant impact on respondents' attitudes towards pre-marital sex. Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart have recently argued that in both the Republic of

[87] 122 in 1969, 261 in 1970, 577 in 1971, 974 in 1972, 1193 in 1973, 1421 in 1974 and 1573 in 1975. Figures from: Dermot Walsh, 'Pregnancies of Irish residents terminated in England and Wales in 1975', *Journal of the Irish Medical Association*, November 18, 1977, 70:17, p. 498.

[88] *Cherish: Proceedings of the Conference on the Unmarried Parent and Child in Irish Society 1974*, (Kilkenny, 1975), p.32, cited in Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'The Boat to England: an analysis of the official reactions to the emigration of single expectant Irishwomen to Britain, 1922–1972', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 30 (2003), pp. 52–70, on p. 70.

[89] The unmarried mothers' allowance was introduced in Ireland in 1973, following significant lobbying by Cherish, the first support group for unmarried mothers. According to Lorraine Grimes, 'Those who were relying on the allowance struggled and only women with well-paid jobs could keep their children even after the allowance was introduced'. Lorraine Grimes, *Migration and Assistance: Irish unmarried mothers in Britain, 1926–1973*, (unpublished PhD thesis, NUI Galway, 2020), p. 136.

[90] Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Youth: A History of Youth in Modern Britain* (Palgrave, 2016), p. 127.

[91] Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 139.

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Ireland and Northern Ireland 'shame and secrecy formed fundamental bulwarks of societies which placed a high premium on sexual "purity"'.[92]

Many interviewees reflected on their fear of bringing shame on their family if they became pregnant outside of marriage and that this fear was enough to deter them from having pre-marital sex. Ann (b.1945) who grew up in a town in the south-east of Ireland, explained:

> Now I was never brazen or … How can I say? … adventurous. I was always a good girl. My grandma used to tell me, 'You're a great girl'. But I was and whereas I'm not saying nobody ever had sex before marriage, of course they did. But it wouldn't enter my head. You know? It just didn't. And I think it was the best contraception ever. Or contraceptive. Because, oh my god, the thought of having to go home if I got pregnant. I couldn't. I'd kill myself, I'd say, before that would happen.

Christine (b.1947) from Dublin similarly reflected on this issue, stating:

> I often wonder what kept me on the straight and narrow, if you like, before we got married was a fear of my mother, a fear of God. But a more fear of my mother that I could not go home and tell my parents that I was pregnant.

Shame can also act as a deterrent whereby 'subjects must enter the "contract" of the social bond, by seeking to approximate a social ideal'.[93] Lily (b.1946) from the north of the country, who was brought up Presbyterian, felt similarly around the issue of sex before marriage. She told me, 'I wasn't having sex. There was no way I would have. And if a person got pregnant anyway I'd have to leave home, you know'. She went on to say, 'you just would be told, like, that "if you get pregnant don't come home". That was the contraception that we used'. Likewise, Bridget (b.1945) explained, 'you never slept with anyone outside of marriage. So even my husband now like we never did until we got married, do you know? And so that kind of didn't enter into it, do you know? [..] Because that was the way it was done'. Bridget felt that if she had become pregnant it would have been the 'worst thing that could happen to you. Oh my mother would have lost her reason, do you know?' Hannah (b.1950) similarly recalled hearing about a girl becoming pregnant outside of marriage:

> I heard about a girl, 'Where is she now?' 'Oh, she's gone. She's going to have a baby'. Like that was the worst possible thing you could probably have brought upon your family. I suppose that was very compelling. You were so afraid.

[92] Earner-Byrne and Urquhart, *The Irish Abortion Journey*, p. 11.
[93] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 107.

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Mothers may also have instilled this sense of shame around the issue of unmarried motherhood in their daughters. Ellen (b.1949) from the rural south-east, for instance, told me of her mother:

> She was good in one way, but she was a very cross woman in another way. And her big fear always, I think was that I would get pregnant or I wouldn't be married, and it was a thing… I even had it in my head that if it ever happened to me I would never again go home. I had this in my head that if I got pregnant I would probably go away somehow and have the baby adopted. I would never go home. But this was just what you had in your head sort of. So with the result I suppose that when I had boyfriends I was… I'd let them kiss me and whatever, but we never let it go any further than that.

Ellen's overriding fear of disappointing her mother meant that she did not engage in any physical activity with boyfriends beyond kissing. She told me, 'There would be no question about it…[engaging in sex outside of marriage] none of us did. Absolutely out of the question. You'd be so afraid of the church and your parents and everything. You would be a finger point, if people knew it. It was such a shameful thing'. Kate (b.1944) also expressed a similar sentiment, stating, 'Having sex before [marriage], we never did, because it was against the law, so you just did what the church told you and you never did'. Similarly, Brigid (b.1945) who grew up in a small town in the south-west of the country, told me that her mother threatened to throw herself in the local deep water quay 'if anything will ever happen to any one of ye, in other words, if any one of ye got pregnant…we weren't even allowed to say the word "pregnant"'. Audrey (b.1934) who grew up in Dublin, received a similar message from her mother:

> Oh, my mother did tell me, she was good to talking to me. She was very good about it. But then it was always, laced with, you have to do what you're told, and you don't, you do have a say and you don't. You don't have sex before you're married. In fact I used to say 'if I ever did give into a fella, they'd have to fish me out of the canal, I wouldn't even wait to see if I was pregnant'. That kind of thing, you know. We grew up with this fear of …

Strict family attitudes in relation to the issue of pregnancy outside marriage reveal much about notions of respectability in twentieth-century Ireland. As Beverley Skeggs has argued, 'respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class', but respectability also embodies moral authority.[94] Sexual knowledge and behaviour were closely related to respectability. For much of the twentieth century in Ireland the

[94] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), pp. 9–10.

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unmarried mother and her child were viewed as outcasts in 'respectable' Irish society.[95] For parents whose daughter became pregnant outside of marriage, there was tremendous shame and stigma which could be damning within a small community. Lizzie (b.1946) for instance felt 'It'd be drummed into you to respect your family. That you were to respect your family and not let your family down. It was, don't let your family down and that was instilled in you so much, that you just didn't do it'. Chastity was viewed as a marker of respectability. A doctor interviewed by *Woman's Way* magazine in 1983 stated, 'Single people didn't have intercourse when I was a student over twenty years ago. That wasn't due to a fear of pregnancy. Nice girls didn't do it and if they did, men would find out and wouldn't marry them'.[96] Dennis (b.1937) reflected on this issue in the following way:

> Put it this way, is that any girl who got into trouble as such, by trouble it meant you got pregnant. That they were actually quite ostracised and everybody … 'She's no good' or 'she's not respectable' or as they would say, 'She came from a respectable family'. That was the ultimate. If her family had a record of previous debauchery, then it was, 'Ah yeah, sure what would you expect'. But if she was in a respectable family it was…

In McCray Beier's study of three working-class communities in Lancashire from 1900-70, 'parents' attitudes towards potential or actual pregnancy demonstrated their own respectability'.[97] Mark (b.1952) recalled his father saying of unmarried mothers, 'Ah, sure what would you expect coming from that stable'.

For those who did engage in some type of sexual activity, in Cathy's (b.1949) words, they 'really had to be careful'. Without access to contraception, engaging in sex before marriage was incredibly risky. While sex education was limited, participants were aware that full intercourse would potentially lead to pregnancy. Dennis (b.1937) felt that he and his peers had been instilled with a sense that pregnancy could happen easily. This helped to imbue a sense of fear around sexual intercourse:

> We felt it could happen rather easily. If you had sex with a girl, you had a 50/50 chance of becoming a dad and all the responsibility. The whole thing was … It was enough to frighten you off anyway.

[95] Maria Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880–1973', *Women's History Review*, 20:1, (2011), pp. 109–26, on p. 123.
[96] 'The sex angle', *Woman's Way*, 8 April 1983, p. 12.
[97] McCray Beier, 'We were as green as grass', p. 470.

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Even engaging in other sexual activities, however, could result in fear. Lizzie (b.1946) said 'Though you'd be tempted to do it, but you went three quarters of the way there and took the chance, and then you'd be petrified'. Several respondents reported 'only going so far' or 'not going the whole way', which could mean either avoiding penetrative sex or sometimes implied use of the withdrawal method. Carmel (b.1952) for instance said, 'I suppose you just knew that if you did something, a certain thing, you would become pregnant. And you just avoided that'. Carol (b.1954) said, 'You could kind-of footer around, but you couldn't, you know, go the whole way. So that was, you know, not unless you wanted to end up in trouble'. Lizzie (b.1946) also told me, 'You see, you still did things that you shouldn't do, because human nature being human nature, you still did it though you knew it wasn't wrong and you knew the consequences of it'. When I asked her how people avoided getting pregnant in these situations she said, 'They wouldn't go the whole way. They wouldn't go the whole way, but there again, you were never guaranteed, it was a chance to take'. Pól (b.1948) from a small town in the west of Ireland explained it as follows:

> Because well the guilt of it and I suppose the whole thing of oh if they become pregnant and stuff. So like I would think most girls would let a fella go as far as, if they were in a long term relationship they would let them go as far as they could go but they wouldn't actually do any of the thing until they got married, which left people frustrated and stuff back then. But I'd imagine, but a lot of times people wouldn't even go that far, you know?

Pól's testimony highlights the guilt attached to engaging in intercourse before marriage but also the fear of pregnancy that was instilled in young people. Colm (b.1940) when asked whether couples in his age group waited until marriage before having sex laughed and said, 'I tell you, you done a lot of fumbling around. Let's put it that way'. Hannah (b.1950) who grew up in a small town in the north-west of the country explained, 'You got involved in heavy petting and all the rest of it. That was it. You didn't sleep with them'. Similarly, Teresa (b.1946) when asked how couples avoided pregnancy before marriage said they would 'just avoid sex if you can but I mean there was a lot of passion, there was a lot of passion'. Carol (b.1954) felt that this was a reason why people got married sooner, explaining, 'You didn't hang around, partly because you didn't want to get pregnant because it wasn't a good idea to be going home pregnant. And I was, I suppose, technically a virgin when I got married, because you know, you just didn't'.

Getting pregnant outside of marriage was thus commonly described by respondents through the use of terms such as 'fear', 'terrified', 'scared'.

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Sara Ahmed suggests that while fear is an unpleasant experience in the present, 'the unpleasantness of fear also relates to the future' because it 'involves an *anticipation* of hurt or injury.'[98] Cathy (b.1949) for example, stated, 'I was terrified that anything would happen to me'. Clodagh (b.1940) from the rural Midlands explained, 'And we were terrified to get pregnant before we got married and you would be terrified of doing anything nearly in case you might get pregnant and I wouldn't go home and tell my mother or my father'.

Respondents were not always aware of what happened to women who became pregnant outside of marriage but their disappearance or the sense of not knowing helped to contribute to a fear around getting pregnant. Noreen (b.1954) for instance, told me: 'You would've known that something had happened and those girls disappeared. They were sent away. So you know that there was something, but you didn't know what. Again, it was all cloak and dagger kind of stuff'. Similarly, Lizzie (b.1946) recalled, 'you always had this big fear and you would have feared that if you did become pregnant, something would happen to you but you didn't know what it was'. As Maria Luddy has argued in the context of the condemnation of unmarried motherhood, 'moral judgement had social power in Ireland'.[99] The majority of the interviewees in my study discussed friends, neighbours or family members who had been sent to a mother and baby home; this may have been because of the fact that my interviews were conducted in 2018–19, a period when the issue was regularly discussed in the media. Cathy (b.1949) for instance, recalled a woman she knew growing up who became pregnant outside of marriage:

> But her mother kept her at home and once she became… Once she got a bump, she wasn't allowed outside the door. So, she stayed at home and I remember going down to visit her one evening with my friends and she was in the bedroom. Not necessarily in bed, but she hadn't been out for a few weeks and she wasn't going to be out until after she had the baby. And then I think before the baby was born, obviously, I don't know if she just went straight to hospital from the house or whether she went into a home for a week or something to have the baby. Had the baby and it was adopted, that was it.

Indeed, fear of pregnancy and the potential of ensuing shame and negative parental responses appears to have persisted for young people coming of age in the 1970s. For Jean (b.1953):

[98] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 65.
[99] Maria Luddy, 'Sex and the single girl in 1920s and 1930s Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 35, (Summer, 2007), pp. 79–91, on p. 89.

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That was the worry really when you think of it. That was the bottom line, you just didn't want to get pregnant because it was frowned about really at the time, when you think. Now if it had happened, if it had happened that would have been okay, but that was it, you just didn't want to get pregnant really. That was it.

For those who did engage in pre-marital sex which resulted in a pregnancy, the shotgun wedding was a common outcome. Colm (b.1940) from the rural Midlands, for example, recalled, 'There was lads done it once and they were caught. And they had to go off and get married. Which was wrong too. There was more people married in this country, because the girl was pregnant'. Maria (b.1957) became pregnant aged nineteen. She married her boyfriend within a short period and had her first child aged twenty. In Maria's case, her parents were supportive and did not pressure her to marry. However, she felt 'But there was still the pressure to think, well how are we going to normalise this? So we did marry. You know what I mean? So society rather than … I suppose you're in an awful fuzz really … mentally about what you'll do…'.

Mary Anne (b.1953) from the rural south-west became pregnant aged 23, and 'because I was pregnant, I had to get married'. In Mary Anne's view 'it was the only option then'. Mary Anne and her husband later moved to England. She came home to Ireland for holidays, but felt that her parents treated her daughter with antipathy. She felt 'because I had to get married, there was that resentment towards her'. Sally (b.1956) from the rural east of the country became pregnant aged 17. She stated:

I was 17 going on 18, and at this stage I think I'd earned my place in the house as being very determined. Because I was still running the financial side of the family. So I just said to my mother, I'm getting married, and that's it. She didn't approve and I went ahead anyway and got married, and she never liked my husband. And she never quite forgave me, except for when my son was born.

Martina (b.1955) who also found herself pregnant aged 17 reflected on the lack of assistance available to her in 1973. Martina felt that her getting pregnant was largely down to her lack of sex education and naivety: 'I got pregnant, I was only 17 and no wonder I hadn't an idea about sex education or anything'. Martina had been working in a bar in her local town but was told to 'pack her bags' by her employer. She returned home to her parents and 'I told my mother and I was told, "You've made your bed now, you lay in it." So, in other words, get on with it now. You've made a mistake and … So, my mother and my sister organised my wedding'. Martina had considered going to a mother and baby home in Dublin:

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I didn't want it at all. And in fact, a friend of mine had taken me up to Dublin to see this priest in Dublin. […] And he involved with one of these mother and baby homes. And I went up to Dublin and met him. And I mean, he'd have taken me in, but somehow or another I didn't want to go to Dublin either.

She decided to go ahead with the wedding. At her reception, she remembered 'looking out the window and I said, "Oh my God, my life's over"'. In Martina's view, getting married rather than going to a mother and baby home 'was the best of a bad lot'.

Catholic doctrine backed up the general belief that, in the words of Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'the name of Irish motherhood was besmirched by the few who became pregnant outside the legal and religious boundaries of the family'.[100] Disapproval could also come from the clergy. Martina (b.1955) recalled, 'I think all the priest wanted was get you married. The most important thing is that when you have that child that you're married. So, there was no … There was no options, there was no anything. I knew he was disapproving, I can assure you. And at that time there was a very strict canon in my home place. And I know he was disapproving, so you were up against disproval everywhere you went'. Likewise, several respondents recalled shotgun weddings taking place in the early morning or on the side altar. Brigid (b.1945) from a small town in the south-west recalled:

I knew one girl in [small town] who was like that. … became pregnant, and she got married at six o'clock in the morning, down in a church down there in [small town] down the road here, because she'd have to get married outside of hours and out of the way, in the dark, and everything like that.

Martina (b.1955) also felt that there was an enduring stigma even though she was married: 'And as well as that, having a baby at that time, 1973, it was a different Ireland. You were frowned upon. And even though you were married, sort of everybody knew you were married because you got pregnant'. Indeed, although marriage was seen as a more respectable option, as Nuala O'Faolain commented in her memoir, *Are you somebody*, following a shotgun wedding:

Then you had to think of some way to explain things, when the baby arrived, seven months into the marriage. Couples suddenly emigrated to England and Australia. Women moved across the country and gave birth and hid the babies and put pillows under their skirts, when their mothers came to see them. Hundreds of babies were firmly said to be 'premature'. No matter how progressive the circle you moved in, you lose everything if you became pregnant outside marriage.[101]

[100] Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, p. 179.
[101] Nuala O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody? The Life and Times of Nuala O'Faolain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997 edition) p. 86.

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Myra (b.1947) recalled one such incident of a 'premature' baby:

> I had a best friend and we were at the wedding. We were at the wedding but I didn't know she was pregnant getting married at all, and about four months after she was married, I heard she was having a premature baby at four months. I said to John – I was very innocent you know. I said to John, gosh I said… 'Myra', he said, 'Would you cop on to yourself', he said, 'You couldn't have a full baby at only four months'.

Chastity was also policed by the community and by individuals' mothers. Mary Muldowney has suggested that 'judgemental attitudes were implicit in the closing of ranks against perceived non-conformists to women's role in the family'.[102] Helena (b.1945) told me, 'We got engaged very quickly, and married within about three months. And there was some nosy old woman up the road. I only heard this later, and she said, "Oh, oh, she's pregnant." So, lucky enough, it was 10 months before my first child was born (laughs)'. Helena added, 'It's dreadful the way you were watched years ago'. Ellen (b.1949) similarly recalled, 'there was one woman and when everyone would get married she'd write the date they got married on the back of the door, and then she'd be counting to see how soon they were having the baby'. Mary Margaret (b.1945) explained to me that she got pregnant on her honeymoon but that her doctor told her she would give birth in April. She told the doctor, 'No I can't, I can't have a baby in April … I was only married on the 1st of August, it has to be May'. Because people might think she had had sex before marriage, she was 'in the horrors' and expressed to me her relief when she had the baby in May, which was 9 months and 2 days after her wedding date. She said that this meant 'her reputation was saved'. This was by no means unusual and sometimes respondents' mothers were responsible for the significant stress placed on their newlywed daughters. Ellen (b.1949) had her first baby nine months after her wedding. She said, 'My mother gave me a hard time over that as well. Yeah, she reckoned that if you have a baby straight away after you're married it was a sign you tried before. And no matter how many times I told her "No I didn't." She wouldn't believe me'. Similarly, Aoife (b.1947) explained that her first child was born nine months and six days after her marriage. She said, 'And right towards the end of the pregnancy, Mother was shocked. She used to say, "Now, just make sure that child doesn't arrive too early – the world doesn't want to know about your enthusiasm". She was horrified, horrified that I'd had sex'.

[102] Mary Muldowney, 'We were conscious of the sort of people we mixed with: The state, social attitudes and the family in mid twentieth century Ireland', *The History of the Family*, 13:4, (2008), pp. 402–15, on p. 410.

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2.6 Conclusion

Looking back on her experiences as a young woman, Virginia (b.1948) stated:

> It was more a God of fear than a God of love that we knew when we grew up. And honestly, so you wouldn't think about those kind of things. It was just going so wrong, and it was that guilt that it carried, wrongly. But that's how it was, yeah.

As this chapter has shown, men and women's experiences in relation to sexual knowledge as adolescents and young adults were shadowed by stigma and the emotions of fear and shame. As Joanne Bourke has argued in relation to fear, 'historians always need to ask: what is fear *doing*? The history of the emotions cannot ignore power relations'.[103] Evidently, by propagating a culture of fear and shame around sexuality and denying individuals access to basic sex education, the Church and State attempted to uphold rigid ideas about how men and women should behave. This culture had long-lasting effects. Fear could lead to unhealthy attitudes to sex later on in life and a lack of adequate sex education combined with the stigma of unmarried motherhood meant that for many individuals, sex was something to be feared, and unrealistic parameters were created around appropriate moral and sexual behaviour. Moreover, as Chapter 5 will show, for many respondents the idea that sex was wrong persisted into adulthood and the use of contraception made them feel significant guilt. The confession box continued to be an important sphere for reinforcing these ideas.

The majority of interviewees received no sex education. Information on sex was picked up in haphazard ways and the vacuum of knowledge was often filled with misinformation and confusion. Engaging in sex outside marriage with lack of access to contraception could result in pregnancy outside marriage which was laden with shame. The fear of potential shame could often act as a deterrent from sex but also contributed to a climate of anxiety around sexuality. While some booklets on sex education emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, these helped to reinforce ideas about what constituted 'good' moral behaviour. Parents were also generally reticent to discuss sex education with their children, instead, attempting to transmit moral codes through oblique messages or simply avoiding discussions altogether. Women, and particularly mothers, were also tasked with the responsibility of policing other's moral behaviour in their families and communities. Women's magazines and television programmes such as The Late Late Show instead reflect a tension between older ideas around

[103] Joanna Bourke, 'Fear and anxiety: Writing about emotion in modern history', *History Workshop Journal*, 55:1, (Spring, 2003), pp. 111–33, on p. 123.

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sexual morality and newer, progressive ideas around sexual health: they were an important source of knowledge and discussion about sexuality and family planning, and attempted to push against these moral restrictions. However, ultimately, women continued to be tasked with the burden of upholding an unrealistic ideal of womanhood which had been propagated by the Church and State.

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