

Intersex Healthcare and Human Rights



Sorcha Ní Fhaoláin

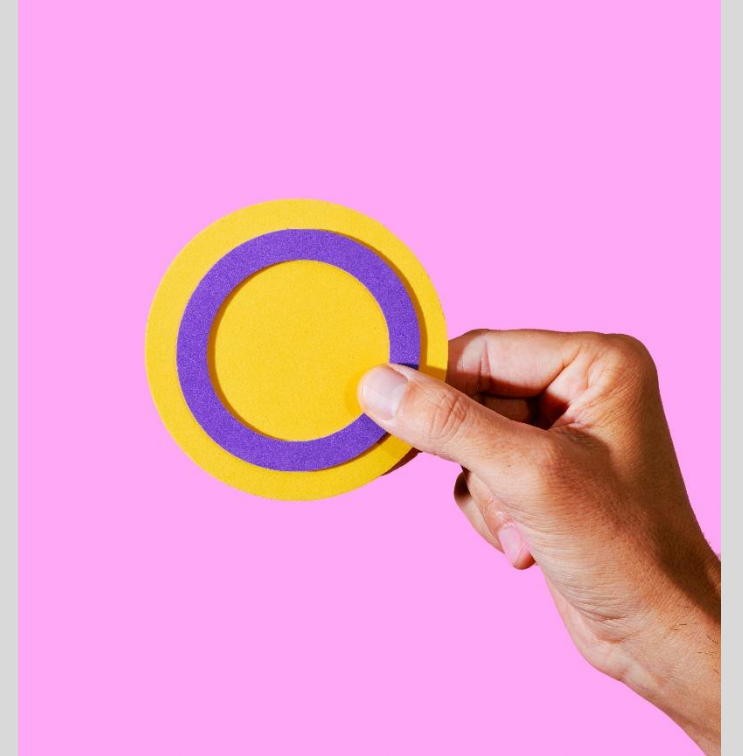
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Silent Letters: Addressing Invisibility in LGBTQIA+ Health and Social Care
RCSI / LGBT Ireland
12 June 2026

Today we will cover:

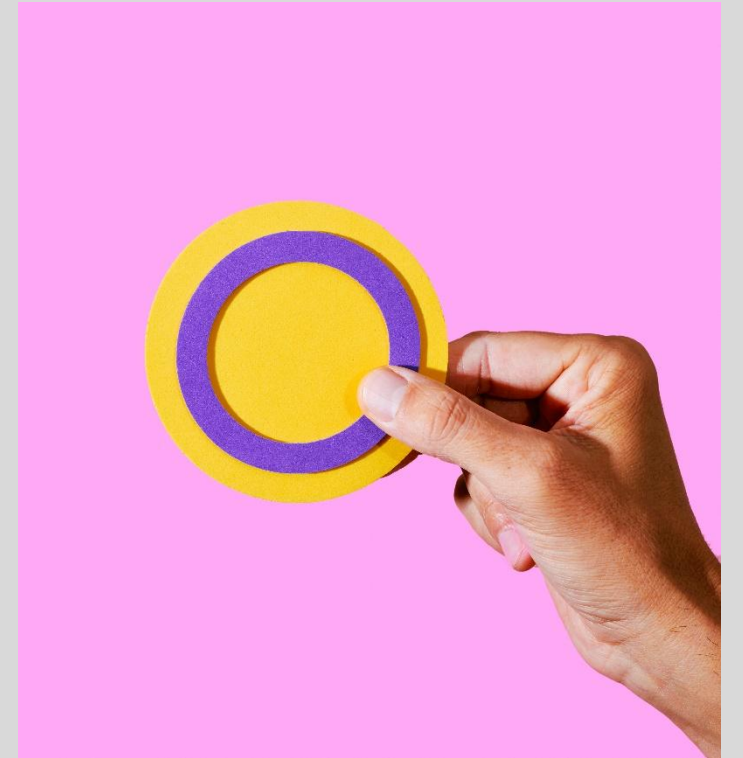
- **What intersex is**
- **Secrecy and invisibility**
- **Mental health and isolation**
- **Healthcare abandonment**
- **Surgery and consent**
- **Wider political issues**



We Have Never Been Silent:

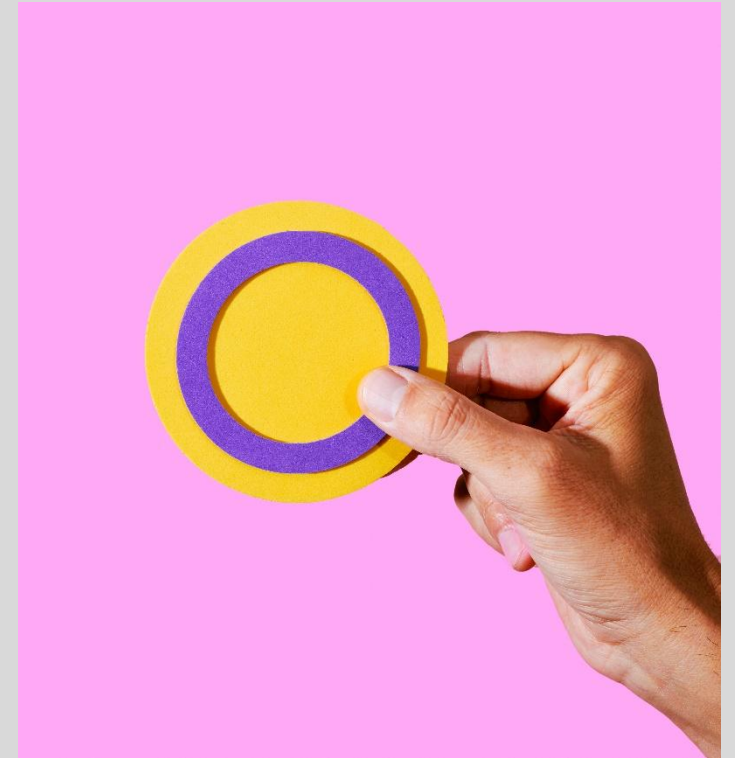
"The question is not why intersex people are silent.

The real question is why so few people have been listening."



Intersex People Have Always Existed

- 1.7% of population (OHCHR, 2017).
- Umbrella term for more than **40** variations that **do not meet strict binary** medical definitions of male and female, i.e., ovotestes, etc.
- Gonadal, genital, chromosomal, hormonal – **not an identity**, although...
- May be cisgender or transgender, heterosexual or otherwise.
- Discovered at birth, in puberty, adulthood or postmortem.



Intersex & transgender

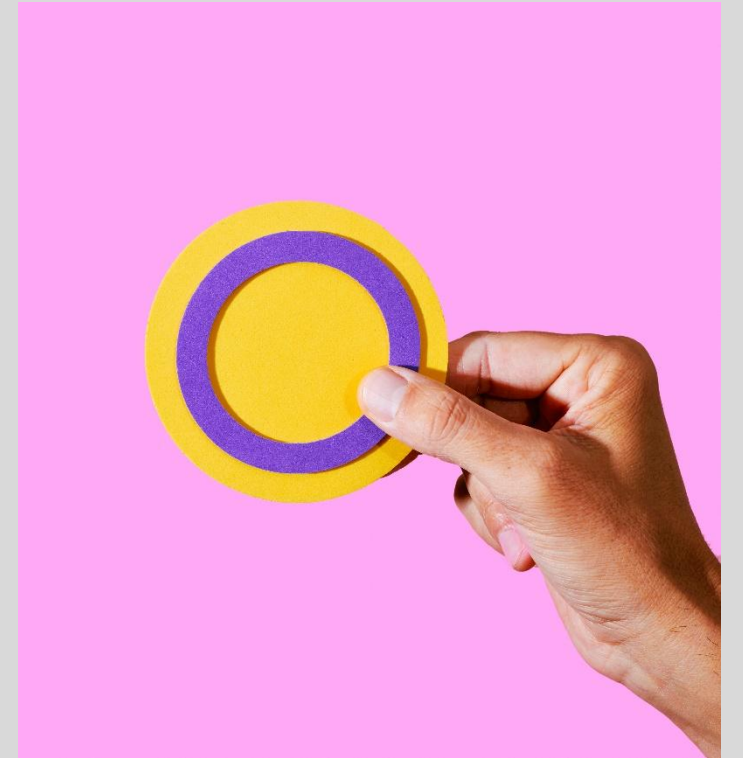
- **Higher rates of gender dysphoria** amongst intersex people (Cools et al., 2018).
- Higher rates of gender dysphoria amongst people with **Klinefelter syndrome** (Cai & Yap, 2022).
- **Higher rates of Klinefelter syndrome** amongst transgender people (Liang, Cheung, & Nolan, 2022).
- Trans intersex people left to grapple with trans healthcare systems to attempt reversal.
- **Transphobia** – Increasingly high rates of discrimination and violence (FRA, 2024).



The Legacy of Secrecy

- **Silence**
- **Shame**
- **Secrecy**
- **Medicalisation**
- **Isolation**

"We are not absent. We have been hidden."



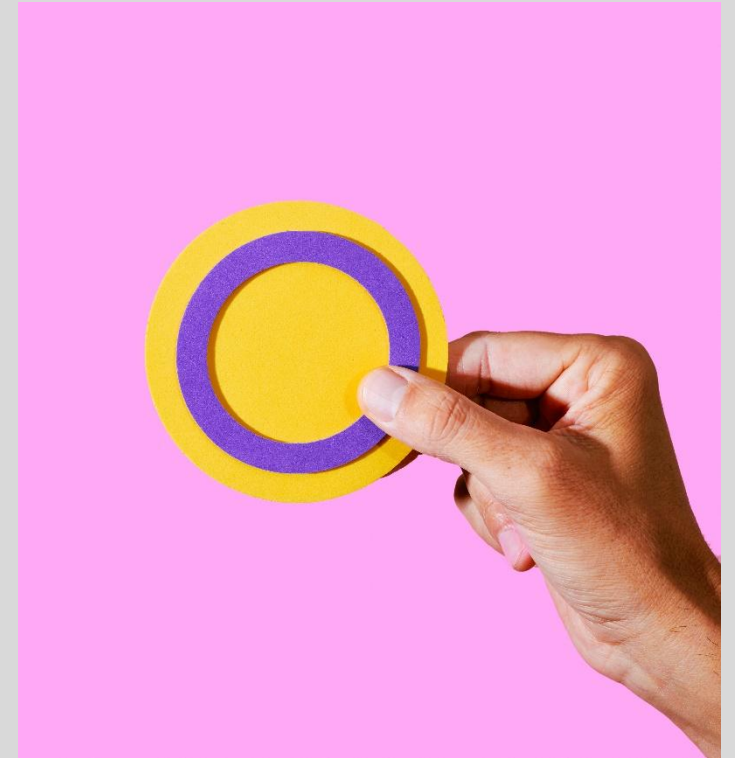
Intersex Healthcare Is Not A Childhood Issue

Decisions made in infancy can affect:

- Mental health
- Relationships
- Trust in healthcare
- Quality of life

Fifty years later

Based on research by Dr Adeline Berry and colleagues



Dr John Money

- **Theory** - every child can be raised either male or female.
- Proposed intersex children born with ambiguous genitalia be **subjected to genital surgery** to align body with typical M/F expectations (Money, Hampson & Hampson, 1955, 1957).
- Falsified findings – **David Reimer** (1965-2004) – Film *Every Body* (Cohen, 2023).
- Intersex surgeries became widespread from 1960s.
- **Recognised as torture** by UN special rapporteur (Méndez, 2013).

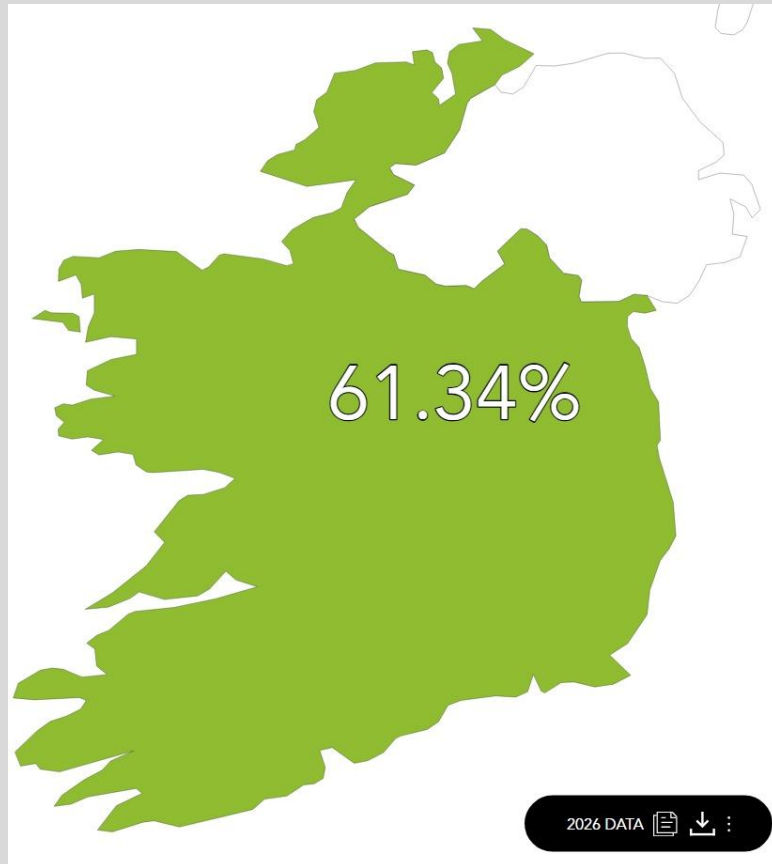


Intersex medical procedures & invisibility

- Some procedures indistinguishable from **Female Genital Mutilation** (Money, 1968).
- Some associated with **high rates of disability** (Skarin Nordenvall et al., 2017).
- Babies with penises deemed inadequate by surgeons assigned female, feminising surgery performed.
- **Med histories hidden**, parents urged to keep child's variation secret, some urged to relocate.
- Invisibilising procedures and secretive practices contribute to **intersex invisibility**.



Ireland Unfinished Business



Healthcare

Intersex adults struggle to access coordinated care

Bodily Autonomy

Human rights concerns remain regarding non-consensual interventions

Equality

Sex characteristics still lack comprehensive legal protection

"Progress is not something we achieve once and tick off a list."

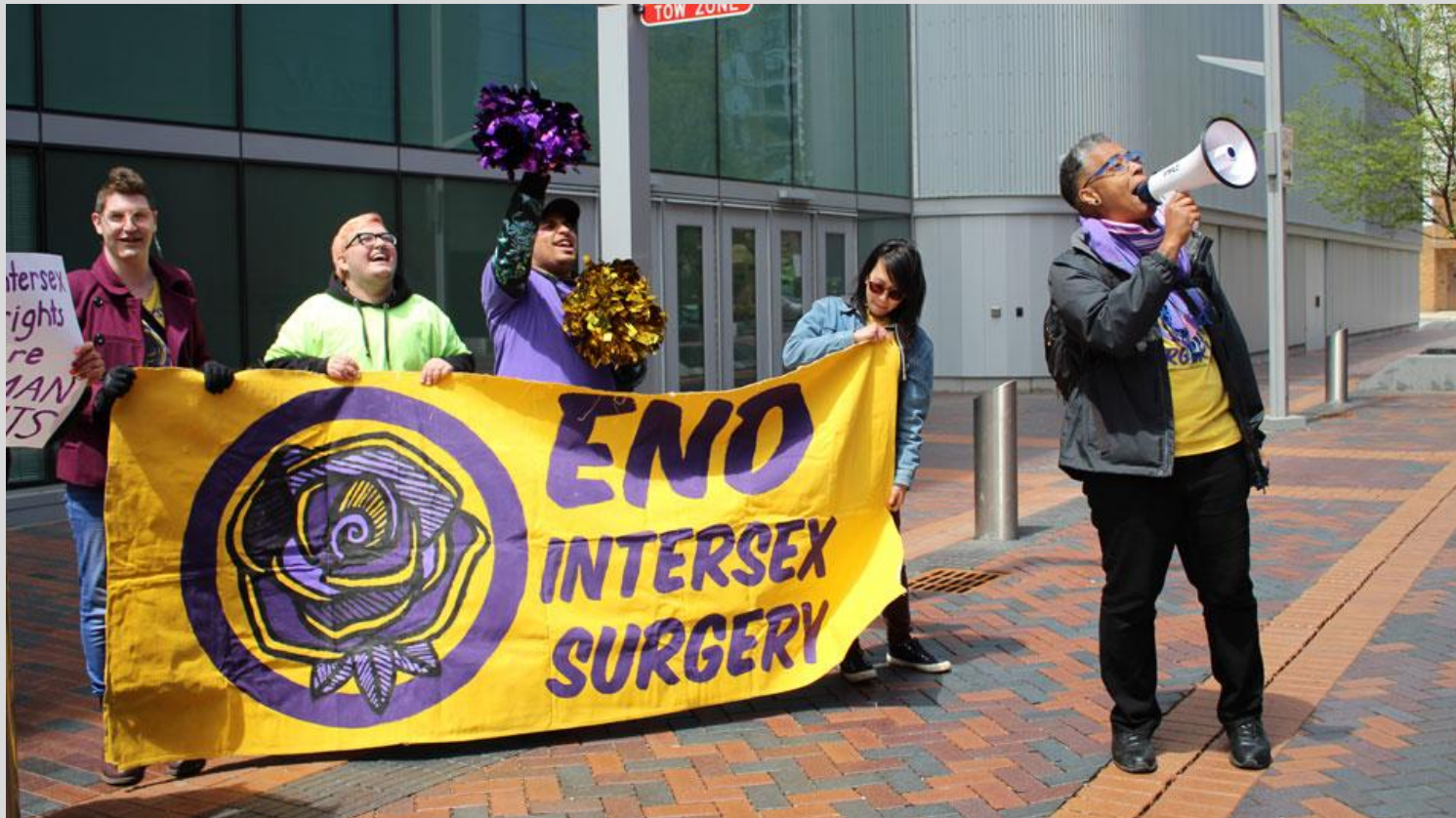


Intersex surgery bans

- Malta banned IGM in 2015 followed by Portugal (2018), Germany (2021), Iceland (2021), Greece (2022) and Spain (2023). A Belgian ban is in the works.
- **These bans are imperfect, however.**
- Drs insist certain surgeries, e.g. hypospadias surgeries, are medically necessary.
- Parents still fly with their children to countries where intersex surgeries are legal.
- Many of these countries, i.e. Ireland & the UK, have FGM bans.



Who Owns A Persons Body?



What Needs To Change?

Listen to intersex people
Include intersex people
Educate professionals
Protect bodily autonomy
Build lifelong care pathways

Nothing about us without us.



Thank You

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Intersex people have never been silent.
We have been here all along.

