

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

# RESEARCH UPDATE

Number 1

June 1999

## Men and Women in Northern Ireland: Challenging the Stereotypes

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The year is 1999, the place is Northern Ireland, and - as our politicians stand on the brink of a devolution that might or might not take place - there has never been a better time to take stock of exactly who we are and what we think. With the launch of the annual *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* the two universities in Northern Ireland have committed themselves to chart, and put on public record, the social attitudes of people in Northern Ireland through the end of this century and into the new one. For the first *Research Update* in the series, the project team decided to mark the launch of the new survey by taking a fresh look at some of the views expressed by men and women in Northern Ireland. In this preliminary and brief paper we take a critical look at some frequently expressed stereotypes relating to men and women - the findings highlight the true diversity of just who we are in Northern Ireland.

### Traditional roles and the modern man

So - men sit around watching sport on TV, do no housework, do nothing to help with the children and are generally sexist? Women, in contrast, are the ones who hold the religious and moral values of the family together (as well as being useless at science and bad drivers)?

Despite the effort that goes into trying to shake these kinds of stereotypes, they have proved to be extraordinarily enduring.

Northern Ireland has never been obviously affected by a tide of feminism sweeping through the land. Indeed both our own and previous research demonstrates that the attitudes of men and women towards gender roles do not differ greatly (Davis and Downey, 1993). However, attitudes *are* on the move. The indications are that there has been something of 'a realignment' of men's attitudes over the last five years.

Both the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey of 1994 and the Life and Times Survey in 1998 investigated attitudes towards working women and gender roles in general. In 1998 men are more positive towards working mothers and indeed more likely to feel that family life suffers because *men* are too involved in their work. They are also distinctly more accepting of the idea of a man staying at home to look after the children while the woman went out to work - and markedly less likely to maintain that 'being a housewife' was just as fulfilling as working for pay.

So are men's attitudes towards family life and towards mothers who work outside the home *really* shifting? It would be wise to be cautious about this until further rounds of the survey are completed, but there are certainly hints of more liberal attitudes in the air.

	Men	
	1994	1998
<b>% agree</b>		
Family life often suffers because men concentrate too much on their work	57	63
A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a woman who does not work	58	65
<b>% disagree</b>		
It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work	41	51
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay	25	34

Further investigation of these ‘modern men’<sup>1</sup> reveals that they tend to be younger, are more likely to say that they have ‘no religion’, to say that they are ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’, and to live in a big city or the suburbs of a city. But what is it about Northern Ireland in the 1990s that has led to this realignment of attitudes?

It may be that these men (who tend to be younger) are merely observing the working world as it exists now following the changes over the last generation. Women are increasingly and visibly working (albeit in ill-paid jobs); there are no longer ‘jobs for life’ where men remain in the same job supporting the family during their entire working life and where men *are* in work jobs may be more demanding and stressful. Interestingly, when we asked people about their priorities for the new assembly - for ‘modern men’ by far the single biggest priority was increasing *employment* opportunities.

### Sexual morality and the modern woman

While men in Northern Ireland are moving away from traditional attitudes to gender roles, there

are also interesting changes to be noted for women. One area in which the changes are particularly dramatic is in relation to attitudes to sexual morality. Women are often perceived to be much more traditional in their attitudes to pre-marital and extra-marital sex than are men. They are sometimes portrayed as the ‘keeper’ of the family’s moral and religious values - the ‘heart’ of the family. Although previous research has questioned this picture - particularly in relation to younger women (see for example, Davies and Montgomery, 1992), the stereotype has nonetheless persisted.

The 1998 Life and Times Survey confirms the finding that in terms of sexual morality, women are indeed more censorious than men of pre-marital and extra-marital sex - but they are much less disapproving than men in relation to homosexuality. Just over half of women think that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is ‘always wrong’ while close to two-thirds of men feel the same. Added to this, public opinion across the board has become decidedly more liberal over the last decade with an especially marked shift in the attitudes of women and young single women in particular.

	1991	1998
	%	%
<b>All women</b>		
Sex <u>before</u> marriage not wrong at all	30	43
Sex <u>outside</u> marriage always wrong	78	73
Homosexual sex always wrong	70	53
<b>Aged 18 to 35 and not married<sup>2</sup></b>		
Sex <u>before</u> marriage not wrong at all	42	64
Sex <u>outside</u> marriage always wrong	77	54
Homosexual sex always wrong	57	22

This is not the end of the story - given the well documented link between religiosity and moral traditionalism (Heath et al, 1993), this move towards more liberal sexual attitudes indicates that we should also be looking at what is happening in relation to *religious* attitudes in Northern Ireland. So what *is* happening?

There is little doubt that over the last eight years there has been a steady falling off in 'religiosity'. In 1998, people are distinctly more likely to have doubts about the existence of God, more likely to describe themselves as 'non-religious', less likely to be confident in the churches and less likely to see God as giving their lives meaning.

	1991	1998
	%	%
<b>All</b>		
Very little or no confidence in churches and religious organisations	16	24
<u>No</u> doubts about the existence of God	61	51
Life is meaningful only because God exists	49	34

In 1991 about half of the people interviewed felt that their life was meaningful only because God exists; but only a third of people interviewed in 1998 felt the same way. And it is *women's* attitudes that have changed most of all.

	1991	1998
	%	%
<b>All women</b>		
Very little or no confidence in churches and religious organisations	11	21
<u>No</u> doubts about the existence of God	67	56
Life is meaningful only because God exists	54	38

So although women continue to be rather more 'religious' than their male counterparts - the gap is closing.

## Ripples or waves?

The job of the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is to measure underlying values, attitudes and beliefs on a wide range of social issues. These are clearly shifting. In broad social policy terms the implications are clear: not only must policymakers acknowledge the reality that Northern Ireland is a multi-cultural society (as well as a multi-religious one), but within the new legislative arena serious account will have to be taken of the advance of secularism. The same is true for changing sexual attitudes and changing attitudes to traditional gender roles. The eventual *consequences* of our shifting values in areas such as the school curriculum, school prayers, integrated schooling, human rights, equal opportunities, working practices, divorce, and health issues like contraception and abortion will only become apparent once the assembly begins its work. But as the media focus switches - as inevitably it will - onto the 'bread and butter' policies of the political parties, an understanding of just how values are shifting within the population will be critical in the years ahead. Will the impact of modernity and the power of the mundane be the salve that covers over the divide of nationality and religion? The Life and Times Survey of 2010 may well give us the answer to that question.

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of analysis 'modern men' were defined as those men who disagreed with the statement that '*It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work.*'

<sup>2</sup> The unweighted numbers of young single women are small for these calculations (50 men and 53 women in 1991 and 61 and 60 in 1998). However because all the results are consistently in the same direction we felt confident in presenting the findings.

Davies, C. and Downey, A. 1993. 'Women 's rights or responsibilities? Reconciling the demands of home and work', in P. Stringer and G. Robinson (eds), *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The third report*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast.

Davies, C. and Montgomery, P. 1992. 'A woman's place in Northern Ireland', in P. Stringer, and G.

Robinson (eds.), *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The first report*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast.

Heath, A., Taylor, B. and Toka, G. 1993. 'Religion, morality and politics', in R. Jowell, Brook, L. and Dowds, L. (eds.), *International Social Attitudes: The 10th BSA report*, Dartmouth, Aldershot.

### KEY POINTS

- Men's attitudes towards traditional gender roles have become more liberal within the last five years.
- About a half of all the men interviewed feel that it is acceptable for a man to stay at home and look after the children while the woman goes out to work.
- In 1991 77% of young single women thought that sex outside marriage was 'always wrong', now only 54% would say this. Just over half of women think that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex is 'always wrong' while close the two thirds of men feel the same.
- About a quarter of the people surveyed have very little or no confidence in churches and religious organisations.
- In 1991 over two-thirds of women had no doubts about the existence of God but now only 56% have such a firm conviction.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. About 1800 adults are interviewed on the main survey and between 400 and 500 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. A joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities, its aim is to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. All of our survey results are publicly available and you can download the data yourself. Check the web site for more information on the survey and findings ([www.qub.ac.uk/ss/csr/nilt](http://www.qub.ac.uk/ss/csr/nilt)) or call the survey co-ordinator at Queen's University (01232 273585) with any queries.