

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

# RESEARCH UPDATE

Number 7

June 2001

## Men in the Mirror

By Steve Biddulph

The liberation of women from narrow role expectations was one of the good news stories of the 20th Century. Women's lives today aren't perfect, but they are certainly freer - both career and education-wise - than their mothers or grandmothers ever were. What's more, they can participate in public life more visibly and powerfully than ever before.

Now, in this new century we are starting to ask "what about the men?" We are realising that men too are often horrendously limited in their life expectations. Our industrialised society only values us as work machines, and gives little thought to our needs to be good fathers, friends, community members and creative beings. Some men's liberation is clearly called for, and sure enough, is beginning to show up in the thinking of Northern Ireland people.

So it's timely that "Men's Life and Times" is a focus within the 2000 Life and Times Survey. This is a milestone event. It is the first large-scale random sample survey of attitudes to men's issues in Northern Ireland. Equally significant, it asks for the opinion of both men and women to a broad range of topics.

First, let's take the things that the 1800 adult respondents to this survey felt strongly and clearly about. Some of these may please and surprise you.

## Support services for men

There were amazingly strong feelings in favour of giving men more support. Only one quarter of those questioned believed that men need **less** emotional support than women (30% of men, and 20% of women). Indeed, 62% of respondents thought that men should spend more time talking about their feelings. There was consensus that the services that are in place to support women should also be extended to men. In fact, women were slightly more in favour of this than men. Specifically, respondents agreed that:

- clinics for expectant mothers should also give practical advice to fathers on caring for a baby;
- it is a good idea for clinics and doctors' surgeries to provide a special clinic just for men where they can get check-ups, advice or health information;
- there should be telephone helplines run by men, for men who need support and advice through difficult times like relationship breakdown, unemployment and bereavement;
- there is a need for special counselling services for men who need longer-term help;
- courses should be widely available for violent men who want to do something about their behaviour.

Table 1 demonstrates the high level of support among both men and women for the creation and/or extension of these services for men. Policy makers please take note!

**Table 1: Support for ...**

|                               | %   |       |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|
|                               | Men | Women | All |
| Advice for expectant fathers  | 79  | 88    | 84  |
| Well Man Clinics              | 84  | 89    | 87  |
| Helplines for men*            | 65  | 75    | 71  |
| Counselling*                  | 74  | 81    | 78  |
| Courses for violent behaviour | 86  | 90    | 88  |

\* These figures include respondents who unconditionally supported the provision of this service for men, as well as those who supported it on condition the same service was available for women.

### Men and children

People were also very much in favour of men being more involved with children and child-raising, and recognised the valuable role of fathers. This, they felt, should be reflected in the legal and welfare systems:

- 80% of respondents felt that men should have the right to some paid paternity leave;
- 64% of respondents believed that men can care for children just as well as women can;
- only 23% of respondents thought that children should always stay with their mother after divorce.

### Stereotypes

There was a recognition that men have had less help than women to change their roles in society, and have suffered as a result. For example, 60% of people questioned felt that it was easier for women to take on men's roles than the other way around.

Interestingly, although there is a common perception of males as aggressors, 70% of respondents believed that violence by women against men happens more than people think. (And these scores were almost identical for men and women, in case you were wondering!)

### Role of school

Much importance was placed on how school can create new opportunities for both boys and girls. It can encourage pupils to be themselves and not be

limited by old roles of what men and women do. It can also help them to get along better with the opposite sex.

Three quarters of respondents thought that schools should encourage girls to train for traditional men's jobs. Almost an equal proportion (72%) thought that schools should encourage boys to train for jobs which are perceived as women's jobs.

The vast majority (91%) said that secondary schools should have special classes that teach boys and girls to respect and value each other.

### Things we are less sure about

Other issues raised by "Men's Life and Times" indicate more mixed feelings, or changing viewpoints that still polarise the community.

### Work and family balance

There is ambivalence concerning the balance between men's work and family life. While wanting men to be more involved with children, most respondents also thought that they should be the main breadwinner.

Just over half (52%) of respondents felt that earning money should be the priority for a man rather than bringing up children. And the figures were higher for men (57%) than for women (47%). BUT, a quarter of men and a third of women disagreed with this, and thought the opposite.

Table 2 shows that there was also a clear age dimension to respondents' attitudes. It's striking that the younger adult generation holds far less to the stereotype that the man must be the breadwinner. Only 37% of under 35 year olds held this view (45% of men and 31% of women), compared to 72% of those aged 55 and over (74% of men and 69% of women).

**Table 2: Earning money should be the priority for a man rather than bringing up children**

|                            | Age group (%) |       |     |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------|-----|
|                            | 18-34         | 35-54 | 55+ |
| Agree                      | 37            | 47    | 72  |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 21            | 18    | 13  |
| Disagree                   | 41            | 35    | 15  |

However, there was some confusion about who is to blame for men spending too much time in the workplace.

Six out of ten respondents thought that workplaces expect so much of their employees that men can't get enough time with their families. This was a view that was shared by both men and women.

Yet on the other hand ... 58% of respondents thought that many fathers CHOOSE to work such long hours that it damages family life - again, with little difference between men and women.

So are men choosing to work hard because they are under pressure from their employers? And is this really a choice? Or are men under pressure from families who - as we saw above - often think that earning a living is their real role anyway? The economy, of course, wants everyone to be breadwinners and to spend more money all the time. Some important questions need to be addressed in this area.

### The male pill

This topic brought some fascinating insights into the mixed feelings and even mistrust we have about who takes care of not having babies!

- To begin with, around 7% of respondents thought that contraception of any kind is wrong.
- As demonstrated in Table 3, exactly half of respondents thought the male pill was a good idea, and only 14% disagreed, while 12% couldn't be sure. (The gender of respondents did not seem to affect the answers to this question).

**Table 3: Percentage agreeing that ...**

|  | %   |       |     |
|--|-----|-------|-----|
|  | Men | Women | All |
| Male pill is good idea                         | 47  | 52    | 50  |
| Men wouldn't take pill                         | 44  | 58    | 52  |
| Women wouldn't trust men to take pill          | 67  | 73    | 70  |
| Women prefer to be in control of contraception | 72  | 78    | 75  |

- 52% of respondents thought that men wouldn't take the pill even if it was available! Women were more doubting than men were.

- Fully 70% of all respondents felt that women wouldn't trust men to take the pill, and 25% were hedging their bets, leaving only a brave 5% (made up almost equally of men and women) to vouch for male reliability!
- Three quarters of respondents felt that women would prefer to be in control of their own contraception. Although if the question had been worded "Should women always have to be the ones to take responsibility for contraception?" one wonders what the results would have been.

Clearly in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the world, the bedroom is where this discussion takes on a more intense flavour!

### Attitudes to sexual orientation

Again this showed some mixed feelings - or a process of change - in Northern Ireland society. However, the analysis of responses to these questions exposed one of the few really divergent viewpoints between the genders in the whole module.

Just over half the respondents (53%) indicated that gay and bisexual people should not be discriminated against, and only 15% disagreed. Nearly a quarter of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. Women were more equivocal than men - 58% of women agreed, compared with 46% of men.

When asked if gay couples should have the same rights as a heterosexual married couple, opinions were very mixed. Only 27% of respondents agreed that gay couples should have the same rights, while four out of ten respondents disagreed. While 32% of women supported equality, only 22% of men did.

### In conclusion

Surveys are never perfect, and a barrel of salt should always be kept at hand when reading them. But nonetheless, they do tell us when something important is happening, especially when strong trends or changes clearly appear in the responses of the people interviewed. And that's certainly the case here.

Far from being a conservative community, Northern Ireland exhibits both an awareness of the need for men to change, and a supportive and pragmatic approach to helping this happen - with the need for new services and educational initiatives for men being strongly supported.

The “walking wallet” prescription is clearly not satisfying for men, or for the women or children who share their lives. To the credit of Northern Ireland people, instead of blaming men for their shortcomings, there is a clear wish to provide help for them to change, recognising how huge these changes are.

For several centuries, the division of life - into women raising children, being the communicators and staying home, while men were unfeeling workhorses who simply paid the bills - was the life that was handed to us.

The freedom to make our own lives, and to rebuild family and community with the full participation of men, is the most exciting thing to happen in a long time. It flies in the face of consumerism and globalisation for one thing, and it gives priority to our lives as connected and loving, for another.

*“Men’s Life and Times” involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 1800 adults and 259 young people in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding. The questions were devised in conjunction with The Men’s Project (Parents Advice Centre), and built upon an earlier survey conducted by The Male Link.*

*Steve Biddulph is a psychologist and parent educator who works throughout the world. His books include Manhood, Raising Boys, and The Secret of Happy Children.*

#### KEY POINTS

- Men’s Life and Times is a milestone – it is the first large-scale random sample survey of the attitudes of both men and women in Northern Ireland to the issues affecting men.
- The important role of fathers and the need for this to be reflected in legal and welfare systems, were acknowledged.
- There is an ongoing conflict between the demands of the workplace and family life.
- School is a key place for helping young people to break out of stereotypes, and to value and respect the opposite sex.
- The use of the male pill was regarded with some scepticism.
- The majority of respondents rejected discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.
- These results raise serious issues for policy makers. There was a particular desire for specific dedicated support services for men, as well as for gender awareness curriculum development in schools.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2000, 1800 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 259 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.qub.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.qub.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.