



Research Update

What women want? Women and gender roles in Northern Ireland

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There is no doubt that over the last half century women's lives have changed significantly in a number of respects. This is particularly apparent in patterns of childbearing and participation in education and in the paid labour market. But what are people's perceptions about what women want and are traditional gender roles being challenged? Questions relating to working women and gender roles were asked in the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey** in 1994 and the **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** in 1998. Survey findings from these years indicated that the attitudes of men and women towards gender roles did not differ greatly. However, in 1998 it appeared that there had been something of a realignment of men's attitudes and that men were more positive towards

working mothers and more likely to feel that family life suffered because men were too involved in their work (Dowds et al., 1999). What are the views and attitudes of the 1,800 adults who took part in the 2002 **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey**? This research update focuses on three main areas: perceptions of what women want; the division of labour within the home and attitudes to work and family.

What women want

The perception that what women really want is a home and children has remained remarkably consistent since 1994. Views have continued to be equally shared between women and men with 36% of both women and men agreeing or strongly

agreeing with the statement that a job is all right but what most women really want is a home and children. Women were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree – 44% of women compared to 31% of men. As shown in Table 1 the idea that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay has been endorsed by fewer respondents in 2002 (43%) than in 1994 when almost 50% of men and women agreed that this was the case. However, the majority of respondents also recognise the importance of paid work to women's independence.

An increasing number of women are participating in the paid labour market. This reflects a desire for women to be more economically independent but is also an economic necessity for many families. Seventy per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that both the man and women should contribute to the household income. With this in mind, it is interesting to examine whether domestic responsibilities and childcare are more equally shared as women have gained footholds in the labour market. Results suggest that the answer is emphatically 'No' and that women continue to carry out the bulk of domestic responsibilities. This is illustrated in the responses to a number of questions about household tasks as set out in Table 2.

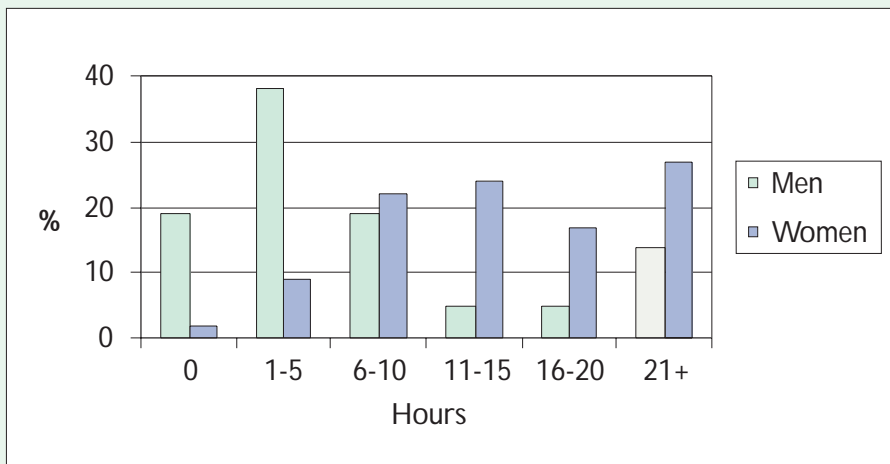
When we further examine the number of self reported hours spent on household work the differential becomes even clearer: the mean number of hours for men is 5.92 compared to an average of 17.15 for women. (See Figure 1)

There is some indication that respondents do not feel this is fair, as 72% of women and 52% of men agreed or strongly agreed that men ought to do a larger share of the housework. Despite this, and perhaps surprisingly, the unequal division of labour within the home appears not to result in disagreement, with 44% of respondents reporting that they never disagreed about the sharing of household tasks and a further 28% saying that they disagreed rarely.

Table 1: Perceptions of what women want (% agreeing or strongly agreeing)

	2002		1998		1994	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children	36	36	32	34	34	32
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay	43	43	42	50	49	48
Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person	59	66	52	59	58	62

Figure 1: Average hours spent on household work (not including childcare and leisure time activities) by gender



The findings on housework are in keeping with other research which has identified that traditional gender roles within the home have proved very resistant to change, even when women have taken on additional responsibilities outside of the home. For example Windebank (2001), in her study of dual earner couples in Britain and France, concludes that although the French women in her study were more likely to work full-time than the women in Britain, this had not taken ultimate responsibility for domestic work and children away from women.

Housework - choice or necessity?

Given the number of people who think that men ought to do more housework,

why isn't it the source of more disagreement within the household and how much choice do women really have over how much they do or do not do in the home? It may be, as Oakley (1974) suggests, that although women may not find housework particularly enjoyable or stimulating, an organised and peaceful household is a more important outcome than an equal distribution of time and labour, especially if that equal distribution was dependent on coaxing, cajoling or coercing men to do the tasks they are unwilling to do. Baxter (2000) relates the continued gender division of labour within the home to the maintenance of traditional attitudes about what women and men should do. In an article on the 'Joys and Justice of Housework' she argues that if men and women believe that domestic labour is women's responsibility then it will

be comparatively easy to justify a situation in which women do the bulk of the work. What evidence is there that Northern Ireland continues to be a conservative community with traditional attitudes to gender roles?

Attitudes to work and family in Northern Ireland

When presented with the following statement: 'A man's job is to earn money, a women's job is to look after the home and family', only 7% of respondents strongly agreed and 17% agreed – with only slightly more men than women agreeing. Fifty nine per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Over 50% of respondents felt that a man working too many hours can have a negative impact on family life. However, responses to other questions do appear to endorse a more conservative view of gender roles. Particularly strong feelings emerged when people were asked their views on a range of situations relating to when women should or should not work outside of the home. Only 8% of people felt that a woman should work outside the home when there was a child under school age. (See Table 3)

Within all of the United Kingdom there has been a continuing upward trend in relation to the number of married and cohabiting women working outside the home. However, women of working age in Northern Ireland are still less likely than men to be economically active, with an activity rate of 60% for women and 80% for men. It is also the case that the proportion of women working in the paid labour market continues to be lower than in Britain. Women in Northern Ireland are much more likely than men to work part-time - 42% of women compared to 6 per cent of men - and this may reflect their attempt to juggle the need and desire to work outside of the home with the need to meet the range of other responsibilities they carry.

Research in Northern Ireland has shown the link between women's participation in the labour market and whether or not

Table 2: Responsibility for household chores (% saying always/usually me)

	Men	Women
Does the laundry	5	85
Makes small repairs around the house	78	9
Looks after sick family members	6	65
Shops for groceries	5	63
Does the household cleaning	7	74
Prepares the meals	7	67

Table 3: Do you think that women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all under these circumstances?

	%			
	After marrying and before there are children	When there is a child under school age	After the youngest child starts school	After the children leave home
Work full-time	81	8	21	59
Work part-time	8	36	52	21
Stay at home	3	44	18	5
Can't choose	6	8	7	12

Table 4: Do you agree or disagree that men ought to do a larger share of childcare than they do now?

	Men	Women	All
Agree/Strongly agree	54	70	64
Neither agree nor disagree	23	16	19
Disagree/Strongly disagree	19	10	13

Table 5: Family and work (% agreeing or strongly agreeing)

	2002	1998	1994
A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work	64	67	64
All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job	44	43	47
A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works	46	42	43

they have children. Figures published by DETI (2003) show that 69% of women without children work outside the home but the figure for women with three children or more drops to 50%. This may be a reflection of the attitudes expressed above but it has also been well established that the high cost and limited availability of childcare in Northern Ireland create problems for many working parents (Evason et al., 1998; Gray and Bugel, 2002). So, women continue to be the primary care providers or organisers of childcare. How likely is it that this could be changed through social policies which encourage or enable men to take more time out of work to participate in family life? Clearly the majority of people surveyed for Life and Times acknowledged that men ought to take more responsibility for childcare with 64% of respondents agreeing that this should be the case. (See Table 4). But, even in countries where there is generous leave and childcare policies, mothers continue to be the prominent caretakers for young children (Ostberg, 2000). O'Brien and Shernilt (2002) in a study for the Equal Opportunities Commission in Britain found that fathers are less likely to take advantage of family-friendly working policies that are in place.

Lupton (2002) argues that a gender difference remains in that the 'good mother' is expected to put her children's needs above her own and to spend more time with them to a far greater extent than is the 'good father' who still tends to be placed in the supporting parent role. Good fathers are expected to continue in full-time paid work but there is more ambivalence about mothers' engagement with paid work, especially when children are young.

An obstacle to men taking more responsibility for childcare may be attitudes to working women and the impact on children. As the responses set out in Table 5 show there has been little shift in attitudes since 1994.

While the majority of respondents believed that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children than a mother who does not work, 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. Only 46% of respondents disagreed or

strongly disagreed with the statement that a pre school child was likely to suffer if his or her mother worked. What is clearly apparent is that there has been very little shift in attitudes since 1994. Gender inequalities in all areas are rooted in social structures but also in attitudes. It is difficult to see how women will ever have the same opportunities in the labour market if equality in the private sphere is not achieved and women continue to provide more than 70 % of all household and caring work.

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Note: Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding

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Key Points

- Attitudes to a number of key issues have shifted little since 1994, including perceptions of what women want and views on working women and family life. In a number of respects people in Northern Ireland hold traditional views.
- The majority of people feel that men need to do more housework and take more responsibility for childcare.
- There is a strong gender division of labour within the household and more traditional views on women's and men's roles may be associated with a less critical perspective of domestic labour roles.
- Women continue to have many roles both inside and outside the home.
- Continuing inequality in relation to domestic responsibilities impacts on equality for women in the paid workplace.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. 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.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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