



Mystery Man?

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Introduction

Men's issues have received increasing public and academic attention in the last few years. For example, the perceived disadvantage of fathers in family law has been publicised by activists such as Bob Geldof, and 'Batman' scaling the walls of Buckingham Palace. Men's health issues have come to the fore, with the setting up of international and local lobbying organisations, such as the Men's Health Forum of Ireland. In addition, a plethora of men's magazines have been released, some more serious than others!

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey first ran a module on Men's Life and Times in 2000. This was seen as a milestone piece of research as it was the first large-scale random sample survey of attitudes to a range of 'men's issues' conducted within

Northern Ireland. In addition, both men and women were asked for their opinions on these subjects (Fowler

and Devine, 2004). Men's Life and Times was also included in the 2004 survey. This Update is based on data from both years.

Work-life balance

There was some support among respondents for the statement that 'earning money should be the priority for a man rather than bringing up children', especially among men – 48% agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 41% of women. However, this was lower than in 2000 (57% and 48% respectively).

Overall, there was a sense that the long hours worked by men has a negative effect on family life. As indicated in Table I, the reasons for such long hours were seen as multiple. Respondents supported the statement that 'most workplaces expect so much of their employees that men can't get enough time to spend with their families' – slightly more women (72%) than men (68%) agreed in some way. These figures are higher than in 2000 (60% for both men and women). However, respondents also felt that

Table I: Attitudes towards men and work-life balance

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing			
	2000		2004	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Earning money should be the priority or a man rather than bringing up children	57	48	48	41
Most workplaces expect so much of their employees that men can't get enough time to spend with their families	60	60	68	72
Many fathers choose to work such long hours that it damages family life	56	60	71	73
Society expects fathers to be less involved than mothers in the upbringing of their children	Not asked		66	61
Society expects men to work longer hours than women work	Not asked		70	62

'many fathers choose to work such long hours that it damages family life'. Similar proportions of men (71%) and women (73%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, which is higher than in 2000 (56% of men, 60% of women).

Societal pressures were also identified, especially by men: 70% of men and 62% of women agreed or strongly agreed that 'society expects men to work longer hours than women work'. In addition, more than three in five respondents felt that 'society expects fathers to be less involved than mothers in the upbringing of their children' – 66% of men, and 61% of women.

Table 2: Reasons for non take-up of paternity leave

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing	
	Male	Female
Many families cannot afford for fathers to take paternity leave unless it is at full pay	94	96
Men don't ask for paternity leave because they don't want to create problems at work	66	68
Employers put pressure on men not to take their paternity leave	50	51
Men will not take paternity leave as they do not want to stay at home with their new baby	20	19

Paternity leave

Linked to the issue of work-life balance is paternity leave. In 2000, there was strong support (80%) for the statement 'all men should have the right to some paid paternity leave'. In 2004, this topic was explored further - a battery of questions was included, placed within the context of the right to two weeks' paid paternity leave established by the Employment Bill (Northern Ireland) 2002.

Nearly all respondents (92%) thought that it was very or fairly important that men should be entitled to two weeks' paternity leave. There was slightly stronger support among women (95%) than men (89%). It was seen as equally important (93%) that this paternity leave should be at full

pay. Again, support was higher among women (96%) than men (89%).

Various reasons for non take-up of paternity leave were explored (see Table 2). Reflecting the strong emphasis on *paid* paternity leave already identified, practically all respondents (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'many families cannot afford for fathers to take paternity leave unless it is at full pay'. Two thirds of respondents (66% of men and 68% of women) agreed in some way that 'men don't ask for paternity leave because they don't want to create problems at work'. Approximately one half of respondents (51%) thought that 'employers put pressure on men

not to take their paternity leave'. These responses suggest that low levels of take-up of paternity leave are perceived to be due to external pressures. In contrast, only one in five respondents thought that 'men will not take paternity leave as they do not want to stay at home with their new baby'.

Support structures

Just over half of respondents (58% of men and 56% of women) welcomed the idea of a telephone helpline for men who need support and advice through difficult times like relationship breakdown, unemployment and bereavement. A further 23% of respondents (20% of men and 25% of women) conditionally agreed, with the proviso 'if there is also one for women'.

Only 14% of respondents categorically said that there was no need. Respondents were less emphatic that such a helpline should be run by men only. While approximately one third of respondents (32%) said definitely or probably yes, nearly two thirds (66%) said probably or definitely not. Men were slightly more supportive of a men-run service than women (35% and 30% respectively).

Related to this, while 60% of women disagreed that 'men need less emotional support than women', fewer men did (42%). In addition, women were much more likely to support the idea that 'men should spend more time talking about their feelings' (82% and 66% respectively). These figures have increased since 2000, when 66% of women and 57% of men thought this.

More than three quarters of respondents (79%) thought that 'violence by women against men happens more than people think'. Agreement was slightly stronger among women than among men (81% and 76% respectively). Indeed, agreement among women is much higher than the 2000 figure of 69%, while the corresponding increase among men was not so high (71% to 76%).

Health and health services

Only one in five respondents (20%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'men's health is not taken seriously by the health services', and just over half (55%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. A higher proportion of men (23%) than women (17%) supported this statement. There has been an obvious change in perception since 2000, perhaps reflecting the increased publicity that men's health has obtained in the last four years: in 2000, 37% of respondents supported the statement, while 29% disagreed.

Perceptions of reasons for men's

lower rate of seeking help from the health services at an early stage were explored. Respondents were asked to say if they thought that each of four issues was a factor. Table 3 shows that a similar pattern of results was identified by both men and women. Firstly, the vast majority of respondents (93% of men and 95% of women) thought that ‘men ignore minor health problems until they become more serious’. Secondly, 86% of men and 91% of women thought that ‘men feel embarrassed about going to doctors and other health services’. Thirdly, just over half of men (55%) and women (52%) felt that ‘men find it more difficult than women to get appointments that fit in with work’. Finally, much less support was identified for the idea that ‘the health services are more geared towards women patients’ (29% of men, 28% of women), tying in with the changing perception of the health services identified above.

Family law

In 2000, four in ten respondents (39%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘family law upholds the rights of women more than men’, with more men than women agreeing (46% and 34% respectively). By 2004, the level of agreement had shown a significant increase – 71% of men and 55% of women concurred with the statement.

In 2000, a very generalised question was asked relating to family law. One in five men (21%) and a slightly higher proportion of women (24%) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘after separation or divorce, the children should always stay with their mother’. In 2004, this was replaced by two more specific questions.

Firstly, respondents were asked to identify which of three statements came closest to their own view about what should *usually* happen to the children after a separation. The responses of men and women

were identical – see Table 4. More than three quarters of respondents (78%) supported the idea of shared parenting, identifying the statement ‘it should be assumed that both parents will share equally in the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to’. One in five respondents (21%) thought that ‘it should be assumed that the mother will do most of the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to’. Few respondents (1%) supported the idea that ‘it should be assumed that the father will do most of the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to’.

Secondly, in relation to who the children should live with, and when the other parent can spend time with them, more than four out of five respondents (84%) thought that

‘the couple should try to work out an agreed arrangement between themselves’. Support for the use of external bodies was much lower - 13% of respondents thought that ‘the couple should use a mediation service to reach an agreement’, and only 2% thought that ‘the couple should just use the legal system and the courts to get things decided’. Again, the pattern of responses between men and women was almost identical.

These figures are interesting in that, while male and female respondents had almost identical responses in relation to the two specific questions, there was much variation in their level of support to the general statement ‘family law upholds the rights of women more than men’.

Table 3: Why do men seek help from the health services later than women do?

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing	
	Male	Female
Men ignore minor health problems until they become more serious	93	95
Men feel embarrassed about going to doctors and other health services	86	91
Men find it more difficult than women to get appointments that fit in with work	55	52
The health services are more geared towards women patients	29	28

Table 4: What should usually happen to children after a separation?

	%	
	Male	Female
It should be assumed that both parents will share equally in the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to	77	78
It should be assumed that the mother will do most of the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to	21	20
It should be assumed that the father will do most of the parenting – unless there is a very good reason not to	1	<1
Other	1	<1
Don't know	1	1

Conclusion

These figures highlight the strong support for specific policies, such as paid paternity leave, the idea of equal parenting after separation or divorce, and for couples to work out custody issues among themselves. The changes in attitudes since 2000 relating to particular issues are interesting, and may reflect the increased publicity that these topics have had in the intervening four years. What is striking is that, for many issues (such as support for paid paternity leave)

attitudes among men and women are remarkably similar to each other. In contrast, for others, such as the need for men to talk about their feelings more, there is much variation.

References

Fowler Colin and Devine Paula (2004) 'Cinderella (Finally) Goes To The Ball. In Lloyd K, Devine P, Gray AM and Heenan D (eds) *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The Ninth Report*. London: Pluto Press pp 5-10

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Key Points

- The negative effect of long working hours on family life was blamed on employers (71%), fathers' choices (72%) and societal expectations of men as workers (65%).
- There was almost unanimous support for two weeks' fully paid paternity pay. Low take-up of paternity leave was blamed on financial concerns within families and pressure by employers, rather than men not wanting to stay at home with their child.
- 79% of respondents thought that violence by women against men happens more than most people think.
- 93% of respondents thought that men ignore minor health problems until they become more serious, and 89% thought that men feel embarrassed to go to doctors.
- 78% of respondents supported shared parenting after a separation, and 84% thought that the couple should sort out this agreement among themselves.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2004, 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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