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Speech made at the launch of Men's Life and Times – a research
module within the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey
15 June 2001.

The Northern Ireland 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. Information on the survey, as well as tables of results and publications can be found at <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>

Results from the Men's Life and Times module can be found in Research Update 7: Men in the Mirror, by Steve Biddulph (<http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/update7.PDF>)

The research being presented here today is a valuable update to what is already a very thought-provoking and important body of work.

The surveys of men's attitudes and values already carried out through the Male Link project have continued to reveal the persistence of stereotypes and prejudice that one might expect. But they have also exposed a significant and growing willingness to question the roles imposed on men by culture and tradition.

These old and persisting attitudes must change if we are ever to build a society where men and women will be able to participate and contribute as equal partners in all aspects of life. It is only through research such as is being presented here today and the discussion and debate it engenders that the necessary change can be brought about. Unless the issues raised in these reports are freely and openly debated we will never be able to

remove the myths and expectations which channel men and women into a certain occupations, ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour.

Too much of what has been said in the past has been based upon assumptions and broad generalisations. We have been far too ready to jump to conclusions about what men or women will accept or reject based on our own instinctive responses and the expectations of those around us.

We need evidence to persuade ourselves and ultimately others that we must not allow prejudice and stereotyping to constrain what we, or others, can do. We must be open minded enough to see the effects of the myths and cliches of gender stereotyping in all our lives and begin to recognise the importance of interconnectedness and how it expresses itself in those lives.

It is a cliché that men don't want to discuss their feelings, their role as men or their emotions. Like many persistent cliches, there is a measure of truth in it but only because of the expectations we impose on each other as the result of what we learn from those around us. The responses in *Men's Life and Times* do identify men's reluctance to explore their view of their role or express their feelings and emotions in an open way. But more importantly they also demonstrate the view of men that more openness, more points of contact and more services for men on issues of emotional and physical health and on the relationship between work and family life are needed. It is not sufficient any longer to assume that because a man does not overtly express feelings or emotions that either they are being coped with or they don't exist.

Men have been slow to tackle issues surrounding their role in society. This research suggests that many men - and women - would wish to see such a discussion take place and the conditions created to achieve change where that is the desired outcome.

It is crucial that we understand that the objective of opening up a debate on men's role in society is the achievement of true gender equality, based on a sound foundation of shared responsibilities, mutual support and above all respect for the contribution of both. It is not an agenda that sets the rights of men against those of women, or to diminish the hard won rights of women by posing rival demands for men. Men's and women's roles are complementary and interconnected and can even be reversed.

The interconnections that come through in this research are complex and even contradictory. For example, while wanting men to be more involved with children, the majority of respondents felt that earning money should be the priority for a man rather than bringing up children. Is this just stereotyping or a recognition that some roles, while not exclusive, are at least complementary rather than the same. Society will only be able to realise maximum potential when everyone is an active participant and using all their skills and talents to best effect and unconstrained by false expectations and prejudice. Some may have simple and straightforward roles and identities but others men and women may have a multiplicity of private and public roles and identities.

It is an important part of the work of the Equality Commission to identify the barriers which still block the path to gender equality and to work to remove them. The legislation which underwrites that work deals with many of the more practical and substantive expressions of inequality.

It is unlawful to discriminate on grounds of sex in employment, or in the provision of goods facilities and services, and it is unlawful not to pay people of different genders equally for work of equal value. Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act designated public bodies must have regard to the need to afford equality of opportunity between men and women when exercising their roles and functions.

All of this legislation deals with the rights of both men and women. It empowers all those who experience discrimination, or harassment on grounds of gender. However, it has not changed the way society is structured nor addressed some of the needs of men highlighted by this research. We have recognised the effects of gender stereotyping on what women earn and the jobs they do. We are also aware of the responsibilities they still retain in relation to caring for others and unpaid domestic work. We know that women are still grossly underrepresented in institutions that exercise political and economic power. This research highlights for us some of the issues for men about work/life balance, the long hours culture and the conflict between caring and providing. We must now address these issues from a broader and more inclusive perspective so that all aspects of life become a shared responsibility for both men and women.

The law has brought about change, but it has to be our task to see that the process of change continues,. The culture of change must be supported and nourished so that change begins to positively affect the lives of both sexes.

Gender stereotyping does impose limitations on the lives of men, and that is to their detriment and to the detriment of society generally. It is interesting to note from the responses in this research, how widespread is the support for the traditional male roles to be challenged.

Almost three quarters of respondents thought schools should encourage boys to train for jobs usually perceived as women's jobs. An earlier survey showed that two thirds of men agreed that nursing was a good career for a man. Intellectual agreement to statements on equality, however, is still far removed from the deep-seated change in emotional responses, culture and underlying attitudes which is necessary if it is to become routine and accepted that men can fill these roles fully and acceptably.

The findings of this continuing survey add greatly to our knowledge and understanding of the issues which must be addressed if we are to achieve true gender equality. Attitudes to work, to family life, to interpersonal relations, sexuality and to health must change substantially if we are to undermine successfully traditional cultural stereotypes found among both men and women and which trap both sexes into a past culture that did not benefit from the wide ranging and non stereotypical talents of men and women and their multiple identities.

Such change will touch not only on the practicalities of our jobs and relationships but on how we perceive our own role and our personal contribution to society.

We cannot expect to make such revolutionary changes quickly or easily, nor without extensive and searching debate. Change is a slow but dynamic process.

I mentioned earlier that women are still paid less than men. Leviticus in the Old Testament makes an estimate of men and women along the lines of **'Thy estimation shall be of the male ... fifty shekels of silver And if it be female, then thy estimation shall be thirty shekels'**.
(Leviticus, Chapter 27)

In the time of Leviticus, the gender pay gap was 60%. Figures from last year indicate that women now earn 85% of men. This **has to be** progress but still reflects a level of inequality that this research causes us to challenge by examining the roles of men.

We in the Equality Commission hope that this project will provide important information to stimulate discussion and increase awareness of the issues surrounding men's roles in the family, in the workplace and in the community. Engaging in that discussion will surely benefit men. And, of course, women.