

1. BACKGROUND TO THE MALE LINK

1.1 Formation of The Male Link

From October 1998 - March 1999 Colin Fowler, Development Worker with The Men's Project, toured the north of Ireland trying to make contact with people who have an active interest in men's work/issues. During this period he met over sixty individuals or groups. However, he noticed that establishing these contacts was more to do with luck and perseverance than having a plan.

Throughout this period a lot of information was gathered about the perceived needs of local men and the actions needed to meet these needs. There was a strong sense that men are seriously at risk of becoming socially excluded. Feedback indicated that many of them feel that every aspect of their manhood has been castigated; that society is anti-men; that they are associated with violence, abusiveness and hostility; that they are struggling to cope with the conflicting demands of a rapidly changing world; that they are branded as "winners" even when they may be "losers" or the victim; that their expectations and behaviour are limited by society's norms; that they have no place ...

However, there was also a strong desire among many groups to meet other people interested in this field and to hear what they are doing. Most people felt that there is enthusiasm to do something in this area, but little knowledge of where to start or how to develop ideas further.

To meet this expressed wish, The Men's Project within Parents Advice Centre convened a meeting on Monday 15th March 1999 in Grosvenor House, Belfast. There was unanimous agreement at this gathering that some form of longer-term association was needed and a number of people volunteered to be part of a "Think Tank" group to refine this proposal further. "The Male Link" (TML) arose out of their deliberations.

1.2 Where the name came from

The name - "The Male Link" - was chosen to show that this body should, primarily, concern itself with keeping people in touch on issues relating to men. Thus, it is a network which links people who have an interest in this field.

1.3 Why have The Male Link?

There were many reasons offered as to why there should be a "Male Link". These included the need to ...

- have a sense of belonging to a bigger network and reduce feelings of isolation and marginalisation;
- find peer support;
- cross-fertilise ideas, establish practical partnerships and share experience;
- increase communication and coordination of activities while, at the same time, reducing duplication, rivalry and jealousy;
- provide a more unified focus for this work and increase awareness of men's work/issues.

1.4 Value base

The Male Link ...

- recognises the value of men;
- acknowledges that men are individuals who have different needs that must be met in a variety of ways;
- believes that the development of men and women is inter-dependent and complementary;
- sees the development of men as being fundamental to the process of realising gender equality.

1.5 Mission

To establish and sustain a network of people who have an active interest in men's work and who wish to raise awareness of the issues facing men.

1.6 Aims

To promote cooperative activity that will help to advance the quality and quantity of work with men/on men's issues by ...

- providing a collective focus for work with men which draws together diverse interests;
- ensuring opportunities for practical cooperation, referral and the sharing of information/experience/contacts/research;
- offering the possibility for people to come together to look at specific issues;
- supporting learning opportunities which may encourage innovation and exploration;
- reflecting the extent and diversity of work - so raising its profile;
- actively pursuing gender equality.

1.7 Membership

The Male Link is a diverse body of people who share a common belief that it is important to increase awareness of the issues facing men and boys in the north of Ireland and who wish to initiate practical measures to meet these needs. Members come from all backgrounds and interests - men's groups, physical and mental health schemes, education providers, family work agencies, research projects, counselling and support services, youth bodies, organisations to support older men, community groups ... Membership is open to anyone who has an active interest in men's work/issues and who can agree with the value base of this initiative. All members are asked to be "partners" and to actively use their contacts, resources and experience to promote this area of work and to support other members, where possible, in their endeavours.

1.8 Coordination

The Male Link is coordinated by a voluntary, inter-agency Steering Group drawn from a broad range of backgrounds. This body meets regularly to determine the focus and direction of initiatives. However, at the outset, it was recognised that there was a need for one agency to act as contact point and secretariat for this venture. The Men's Project (within Parents Advice Centre) fulfils this task at present.