

2. RESEARCH PROCESS

2.1 The Male Link work plan 1999 - 2000

When The Male Link (TML) Steering Group first met, they set themselves five goals for the year 1999 - 2000. These were to:

- establish a web site (please visit it at: www.mensproject.org/malelink.html);
- produce and distribute a regular newsletter (called "Male Matters");
- convene a series of Focus Groups to look at the issues facing specific groups of men (report now available on-line at www.mensproject.org/tmlfocus.html);
- organise a major North-South conference to raise awareness of men's work and issues - held in the Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh, Co. Tyrone on Wednesday 18th October 2000. See www.mensproject.org/malelink.html for a copy of the conference report or contact The Men's Project;
- begin the process of researching the attitudes and values of males in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties (this report is now available on-line at www.mensproject.org/tmlatts.html).

2.2 Need for research

The Steering Group members recognised that men's work/issues in the north of Ireland is still under-developed and, often, uncharted territory. However, they also recognised that there is growing interest in this field. While this is positive, it also brings certain dangers. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that future programmes may be developed by well-intentioned people based upon hearsay and stereotypes rather than upon knowledge and understanding.

In reality, we know very little about what males think about a range of issues. There has never been a large-scale survey of men's attitudes and values conducted within the north of Ireland - except by commercial companies eager to increase their sales. Subsequently, the Steering Group felt that research into men's attitudes and values should be a priority area of work for The Male Link and that this could fill the vacuum. It was also felt that The Male Link was in an ideal position to begin the process of collating this information and that any data generated would be of use to the entire network.

2.3 Purpose of research

It was hoped that conducting this research would serve four main purposes:

- 1) Provide first-hand, baseline feedback on men's views about themselves and the world they live in.
- 2) Highlight key issues and inform the focus, direction and implementation of practical programmes for men across the north of Ireland.
- 3) Provide a lever to exert pressure for increased resources in this area.
- 4) Raise the public profile of men's work/issues.

2.4 Research Sub-Group

This proposed survey was one of five key tasks which The Male Link wished to undertake during the year 1999 - 2000. It was agreed that a Research Sub-Group should be established to move the proposal forward. This group was comprised of:

- **Nuala Brady** - Young Men and Positive Mental Health Project, Ballybofey
- **Shirley Ewart** - PhD Research Student, University of Ulster at Magee
- **Colin Fowler** - The Men's Project (within Parents Advice Centre), Belfast

During this project the Research Sub-Group met six times in addition to giving/receiving feedback at seven full Steering Group meetings. Further regular exchanges took place by phone, fax and email.

2.5 Research process

It was decided by the Sub-Group that the research process would involve:

- agreeing a series of pertinent headings for issues;
- identifying and classifying questions;
- devising a questionnaire as the tool to gather data;
- asking other researchers/academics to review the format and structure of the questionnaire;
- piloting the questionnaire among the contacts of the Steering Group before widely circulating it;
- administering the field-tested questionnaire (see Appendix 1);
- sharing the financial cost of producing and distributing the questionnaires among Steering Group members - with The Men's Project bridging any gaps;
- at least 500 participants;
- the responses being initially inputted into a Microsoft Access Database (common to all members of the Sub-Group) and later transferred into SPSS format;
- cleaning the SPSS format data;
- analysing the results;
- producing a report on the outcomes.

2.6 Question identification and design

The Male Link has a diverse membership and it was decided at the outset of this project that the range of questions should reflect this diversity. Colin Fowler from The Men's Project had already recorded a large number of pertinent issues/questions during his initial attempts to establish a network. However, The Male Link Steering Group also spent a considerable amount of time brainstorming on possible themes and questions. A number of key headings were then agreed to try to cover as many areas of interest as possible. These were:

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|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| ❖ Emotions and Feelings | ❖ Employment and Education |
| ❖ Equality | ❖ Family |
| ❖ Health: Mental and Physical | ❖ Leisure |
| ❖ Masculine Identity | ❖ Relationships |
| ❖ Sexuality | ❖ Society |
| ❖ Support | |

The Research Sub-Group had responsibility for refining questions and assigning them to particular headings. However, they recognised that such classification was subjective and, in reality, many questions could also have been located elsewhere.

2.7 Draft questionnaires and pilot phase

It was decided that the questionnaire should follow the format of a statement followed by five options - "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree", "Strongly Disagree" - and that respondents would be asked to choose which best represents their views. There was also a series of "open questions" at the end. Forms could be completed on an individual basis or in a group-facilitated environment - to overcome the danger that individuals may be excluded due to literacy difficulties.

The questionnaire was presented in five draft formats and discussed by the Steering Group before it was agreed that it should be piloted. In addition, other TML contacts - who had a background in research techniques - were consulted for their comments. This process helped to:

- simplify the language used;
- delete questions with "double meanings" and ambiguity;
- define the best order in which to present the questions;
- ensure that the questionnaire was as short as possible.

All members of the Steering Group were then asked to distribute five questionnaires to males that they knew and to record their comments on its length, layout, clarity of instructions, how they felt about answering particular questions etc. The Pilot Phase feedback was very positive. The only major recommendation was that there should only be one "open question" at the end instead of the five original ones. It was agreed that this question would still allow for any additional issues/comments to be aired.

2.8 Distribution/return of questionnaires

The Sub-Group decided that the target number of responses should be 500 and the field-tested questionnaire was, subsequently, distributed on three levels:

1. TML Steering Group members were asked to target specific groups of males (e.g. men's groups, work places, football teams, youth clubs, schools, job training programmes, church groups, disabled men, rural/urban projects etc.) to ensure diversity and that people outside of "men's work circles" were reached. They were also asked to:
 - share the financial cost of producing and distributing the questionnaires - with The Men's Project bridging any gaps - and to print 100 copies (A₃ back-to-back);
 - take personal responsibility for the coordination/distribution/collection/return of these questionnaires;
 - give out no more than 20 questionnaires to any particular group and get the responses of at least 5 groups;
 - ensure that the questionnaires were returned in large batches.
2. Existing TML contacts were encouraged to take on a "partnership franchise" i.e. to take a number of questionnaires (maximum 20), distribute them to males that they knew and to coordinate their return.
3. Other individuals or groups - some unknown to TML - were solicited via advertising e.g. The Men's Project's "News Update"/web site, TML's "Male Matters" newsheet and via a number of community journals and newsletters. The Blind Centre NI provided a particularly valuable service by putting the questionnaire onto audio tape and publicising this through their "Talking Magazine" programme. Four people returned questionnaires in this format.

2.9 Inputting data

A Microsoft Access database was designed to hold the results generated. This package was chosen because all the Sub-Group members were responsible for inputting the questionnaires and this was the only database software owned by all of them. Additional inputting was carried out by Maureen Wynne - a third level student from the USA on placement with the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey Team (a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster).

2.10 Generating results and analysing data

Paula Devine, Co-Director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey Team, was asked by the Research Sub-Group to help with the process of generating results and analysing the data. She did this on a voluntary basis. Paula worked with Maureen Wynne to:

- convert the Access database into SPSS format;
- clean the data;
- run frequency tables and cross-tabulations on the data;
- prepare an “Initial Findings” report;
- highlight the main themes/issues arising from the research.

Paula also presented the statistics in this report.

2.11 Limitations of research

The Male Link is an independent body which is not owned or funded by any other organisation. All members participate in a voluntary capacity. TML has no tangible resources other than the limited time which members give and the practical expertise that they can bring to specific tasks. Subsequently, this research had to be conducted for “free” and all expenses were absorbed by members of the Steering Group.

Lack of money and dedicated personnel inevitably shaped what was possible in this study. It set the boundaries for how many respondents could be sought, the number of questions/themes addressed, how representative the sample of participants could be, the length of this report, how many reports could be produced in hard copy ...

From the outset, the Research Sub-Group acknowledged that the methodology adopted to select participants was not scientific. However, they also recognised that some of the limitations of this approach would be overcome by securing the responses of a large number of men from diverse backgrounds and by actively engaging males who were not already involved in men's work.

2.12 Difficulties and missed opportunities

Conducting this research raised a number of difficulties for The Male Link:

- There was no budget to undertake this study and, so, voluntary groups - who are often already underfunded - had to meet the cost out of their own resources.
- Some potential partner organisations felt that this was a “stupid idea”.
- A number of the men who were asked to participate did not seem to take this study seriously.
- Peer pressure amongst men often dictated whether they would participate or not.

- Confidentiality was seen as a problem when asking males to complete forms. To overcome this, unused envelopes were given out so that completed forms could be sealed and returned.
- Only 139 respondents (22% of total number) offered any additional comments in the final “Open Question” section.
- A large number of the questionnaires were returned without the profile page being fully completed.

2.13 The future

Throughout this study, The Male Link received a high degree of practical support from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey Team. This was greatly appreciated - especially given our experience of the general ambivalence among funders/decision-makers towards looking at men's issues.

NILT have now decided to build upon the findings in this report and have included a “Men's Life and Times” module in their 2000 survey. This module re-visits some of themes covered here and introduces additional ones. Their results will be available on-line at www.qub.ac.uk/nilt before summer 2001.