

## 4. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project does not provide a fail-safe template for future work with men. However, it was never meant to. From the outset, The Male Link recognised the resource limitations that, ultimately, bounded the scope of topics covered, the number of respondents solicited and the sampling techniques adopted. This study did, though, meet its original aim of providing baseline feedback on local men's views about themselves and the world that they live in. It also highlighted a range of issues which need to be tackled. Subsequently, this is a starting point for further investigation rather than an end product.

Based upon the outcomes of this study, the Research Sub-Group recommends that the following issues should be addressed in the future:

- ❖ **FURTHER RESEARCH ...** Due to limited resources, this project lacked scientific rigour. However, this is still an under-researched area and there is an urgent need for further investigation into men's attitudes and values, as well as mechanisms to engage men in support programmes.
- ❖ **CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES ...** There was consensus that men are often portrayed in a negative light by the media and that males' expectations and opportunities are limited by stereotypes. There is a need for a high profile "Positive Messages For Men" campaign which challenges this negative imagery (and homophobia) and allows men to visualise/identify with other possibilities for their life. This should help to free men rather than create new 'ideal types' to conform to. It should also present a message that "it's OK to fail".
- ❖ **WORKPLACE ...** Despite indicating that they no longer see "breadwinning" as a primary role for men, many respondents felt that it is very difficult for them to take on roles and tasks traditionally associated with women. One way to overcome this would be to have a proactive recruitment drive to encourage males to enter workplaces which are predominantly populated by females e.g. nursing, primary school teaching, child care etc. This will require a change in the public mind-set which may perceive men as uncaring and/or fears them as potential abusers and rapists.
- ❖ **EQUALITY ...** The need for genuine gender equality was a major issue for many men. There was a strong sense that this should seek to protect the rights of human beings and not focus solely on the rights of women. Many men felt that they had been/were being discriminated against because of their sex. This was seen to be particularly true within family law and employment scenarios. Existing laws and legal procedures need to be systematically screened to ensure that they treat all parties fairly and do not merely reflect a bias towards either sex. Public bodies formulating Equality Schemes should also actively seek to consult with men as a discrete group who have distinct experiences, concerns and needs.
- ❖ **FATHERHOOD ...** Many men recognised the important role that fathers play in the lives of their children. More positive recognition needs to be given to this to counter the image of fathers as disinterested absentees whose only function is to be a "pay packet". Alongside this, structures need to be put in place to allow fathers to play a more active part in the development of their children e.g. access to paid Paternity Leave, a decrease in working hours/increase in hourly rate of pay, support for divorced and separated fathers, systems to ensure fair/meaningful contact between children and their parents after separation, fathers' parenting education groups etc.

- ❖ **HEALTH ...** There was a strong feeling that men should look after their health and personal well-being more. Yet, this is another area where stated preference does not, necessarily, equate to action. Men's health should become a priority area of intervention. However, creative and innovative pilot projects must be undertaken to help determine appropriate means to engage men. This might involve Saturday/evening clinics at GP's Surgeries, mobile health check units at workplaces, specific "Well Man" clinics, community-based men's health days, creative alternatives to going to the pub etc. Within this strategy, support for men's mental health is crucial.
  
- ❖ **SELF-EXPRESSION ...** Contrary to the public stereotype, respondents indicated that males do see the value of expressing their feelings and want/need support. However, this motivation rarely seems to translate from aspiration into practical action. Pilot projects need to be established to see how this could be addressed.
  
- ❖ **SUPPORT ...** Although there was a strong feeling that support services are geared towards women, many men felt that they, too, need support. They viewed other men/fathers, men's groups and the churches as some potential allies. This gives a mandate for further development in these fora. However, to date, most men's support is offered by the voluntary and community sector and very few specific services for men are organised by the statutory sector. This may be because men often present themselves as being in control/do not ask for help, or because support providers have not recognised the need, or because men are seen as a low priority in terms of resource allocation. Either way, a crisis is imminent and there is an urgent need for action in this area. As a starting point, support could usefully be offered to fathers, victims of violence (both inside and outside the home), men who have recently had a trauma in their life (e.g. bereavement, illness, loss of job, relationship break-down etc.), gay/bisexual men and disabled men.
  
- ❖ **COMMUNITY ...** There was overwhelming support for the idea that men should be involved in improving their local community yet, in practice, males may be conspicuously absent from such activity. Trial projects should look at how the skills and expertise of men can be better utilised in community development initiatives, and how this largely untapped resource can be accessed.
  
- ❖ **NETWORKS AND BEST PRACTICE ...** Men's work/issues is in its infancy in the north of Ireland. As such, it is fragile and on a steep learning curve. However, this is not the case in all parts of the world. The enthusiasm currently around needs to be nurtured and sustained. This might be achieved by encouraging networking between interested people, sharing experience and resources, and by collecting best practice from both national and international sources.
  
- ❖ **RESOURCES ...** At present, there are few resources invested in men's work/issues - despite the emerging awareness of the need for action. This situation should be addressed as a matter of urgency. There is enthusiasm to promote change, but little means to initiate it. When seeking financial support to undertake this research project it became clear that although many potential funders will underwrite "Gender Equality" or "Gender Issues" programmes, they see these terms as being synonymous with women's work and issues. However, there is a danger that the need for resources to develop men's work will compete with the demands of women for resources to establish/maintain/expand their area of concern. This will, inevitably, lead to mistrust and competition between these interests and must be avoided. Meaningful, long-term work can only be achieved through cooperation and complementary development between men and women. Consequently, the development of one group cannot be at the expense of the other.