

MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF GENDER (IN)EQUALITY AS A PRIMARY OR SINGLE PARENT

Abstract. *This article points to ambivalent discourses about contemporary fatherhood where the feminist and gender equality discourse stands for equality in parenting, while fathers' rights groups call for an essentialist understanding of gender roles. Despite the gender-neutral legislation in Slovenia, the institutions follow an essentialist discourse when granting fathers child custody. An analysis of 12 interviews with fathers who are the primary child carer reveals the specific situations marginalised (unemployed, poor) masculinities encounter in their relationship with the complicit masculinity (middle class) (Connell, 2005), while also drawing attention to the structural inequalities the interviewed men experience while pursuing their parental rights. In institutions, policies and everyday practices, men are perceived and treated as the secondary parent.*
Keywords: *involved fatherhood, masculinities, gender equality, fathers' rights groups*

Introduction

Gender equality needs to address both genders in order to sustainably change predominant gender imbalances and inequalities in European societies (Scambor et al., 2013: 2).

In the last few decades, research and fatherhood studies in particular have shed light on the perceptions, trends and practices of fathering, pointing to both the transformation and pluralisation of fatherhood (Brandth and Kvande, 1998; Hobson, 2002), which must be viewed in the context of the wider changes occurring in masculinity (Hanlon, 2012; Scambor et al., 2015). The turn from the breadwinner model to caring fathers of the late modernity is mostly denoted by a movement towards the sensitisation of fathering practices, which are linked with caring fatherhood practices (Hochschild, 1995). However, apart from the rise of the dual-earner model and caring fatherhood in the last decades, findings showing the legitimisation of absent

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fathers are important for understanding masculinity and the pluralisation of fatherhood (Dermott, 2008). Absent fatherhood may be understood in the context of postmodern choices related to motherhood as the necessary condition of parenthood (Švab, 2001) and in the context of the non-inclusion of fathers in childcare after divorce and separation (Dermott, 2008).

Understanding equality as forming the basis of modern societies that addresses women and men, this article examines the diverse experiences of men as fathers in their fatherhood roles and fathering,¹ and while pursuing their parental rights. It shows the inequalities and discrimination faced by fathers who are the primary child carer with full or shared child custody. In so doing, the article considers how masculinity and the establishment of male domination are comprehended, while noting Connell (2005) who says they operate through “configuration practices”. Male domination defines the hierarchies between women and men and within each of these social groups. Connell (2005: 76–81) elaborates its multi-layered functioning by introducing the concept of hegemonic masculinity and distinguishing four types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalised. The norms of how men should behave are congruent with the hegemonic masculinity that marginalises both women and men who do not meet the associated norms.

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.
(Connell, 2005: 77)

Connell (2005: 78) places homosexual masculinities “at the bottom of gender hierarchy among men” as subordinated masculinities through practices like exclusion, hate speech, legal violence, street violence and discrimination. While only a small share of men meets the hegemonic norms, most men benefit from the patriarchal dividends (such as income, access to power, ownership and property), which Connell defines as complicit masculinities (ibid.). Gender interacting with other structures, like class and race, develops relations between hegemonic and marginalised masculinities (Connell, 2005: 122).

¹ *Fathering refers to the care practices and relationships used in doing fatherhood. Fatherhood refers to identity and is formed through the institutional framework, legislation (such as legislation on marriage, intimate partner relationships and child custody) and welfare state policies that frame the relationship between the individual as a worker and as a parent (Hobson and Morgan, 2002).*

Based on a qualitative study carried out within the *Masculinities, Equality, Care Practices*² research project, the article shows how masculinities interplay with class, and how this collides with the institutional regulations of gender relations and parenting in the policy framework (primary custody etc.) that influence, constrain and legitimate fatherhood and the care practices of fathers. The individual interviews with men who are the primary child carer illustrate how inequalities and discrimination appear. The first part of the article provides an overview of common points and confrontations of different discourses on fatherhood, bringing to the foreground aspects like the congruency of feminist critical reflections, the gender equality discourse on involved fatherhood, and studies on fatherhood, all of which recognise men's greater involvement in childcare as a harbinger of wider changes in masculinities (Scambor et al., 2015). However, the feminist vision of equality, which is largely consistent with critical men's studies and the gender equality discourse, collides with the anti-feminist discourse engaged in by fathers' rights groups. We highlight the main differences among ambivalent discourses of fatherhood while critically reflecting on the role played by the state and its policies in framing fatherhood, particularly when granting child custody. In the second part, we present the methodological framework and analysis of the fathers' narratives, their care practices and experiences with different institutions (centres for social work, courts of law) as they seek to acquire parental rights. The analysis reveals the specific situations marginalised (unemployed, poor) masculinities encounter in their relationship towards the complicit masculinity (heterosexual, middle class) and draws attention to the structural inequalities the interviewed men experience. Another interesting question appearing here that will be considered while looking at the empirical material is: What potential does involved fatherhood hold for gender equality?

Feminist considerations about fatherhood and the unequal division of childcare

Gender inequality in sharing childcare has been extensively researched in critical feminist theory. Numerous feminist authors regard the lack of care work being shared between men and women as a crucial impact of gender inequality in society (Oakley, 1980; Bubeck, 1995). The psychoanalytical approach has drawn much attention to feminist discourses about fatherhood (Chodorow, 1978), arguing that if men became as intensely involved

² *The project Masculinities, Equality, Care Practices (2017–2020), funded by the Slovenian Research Agency, is being carried out by the Peace Institute in cooperation with the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana. For more information on the project, see: <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/en/projects/masculinities-equality-care-practices-mesp/>.*

in childcare as women this would give rise to gender-equal parenting and the transmission of care patterns that would not be exclusively linked to women being primary carers.

The distribution of care and domestic work between women and men, and surveys on how time is used, are common focal points in feminist theories, gender studies and fatherhood studies. The rich feminist material critically highlights the finding that men are today more actively participating in childcare than men of the previous generation (Bianchi et al., 2000). Nevertheless, a growing number of studies report of that the gender gap in the division of care is only being closed slowly, mainly due to women's reduced care work by virtue of their participation in the workforce, rather than, as would be expected, due to the greater participation of men (Kan et al., 2011).

As Doucet and Lee (2014) emphasise, in the past 20 years gender research has focused on understanding the key obstacles that prevent men from more actively participating in care work, ranging from masculine norms (Deutsch, 1999), parental models (Coltrane, 1996), the 'doing gender' of mothers and fathers (Deutsch, 2007), embodiment in caregiving (Doucet, 2009) through to maternal gatekeeping (Fagan and Barnett, 2003). Feminist social policy studies importantly complement these findings by revealing structural obstacles to involved fatherhood like the gendered segregation of the labour market, gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), the gender pay gap, employment, and family policies (Haas, 1993; Brandth and Kvande, 2009).

Anti-feminist discourse on fatherhood: romanticised hegemonic masculinity and the ideal of patriarchal authority

While changes in masculinity leading towards gender equality in both the discourse and everyday practices of men are becoming ever more apparent, one cannot ignore the anti-feminist vision of the return of the 'real' man and 'father/patriarch' defended by different men's groups and fathers' rights groups³. Fathers' rights groups defend the rights of fathers, which may support men in divorces and separations, offer them psychosocial support, and are not always necessarily opposed to feminist principles. Namely, the heterogeneity found in fathers' rights groups ranges from those who advocate a discourse of equality and gender-equal parenting and base their custody requirements on the greater participation of fathers in

³ *Fathers' rights groups in Slovenia, such as the Association of Fathers of Slovenia and Door, raise questions about whether fathers are being discriminated against in relation to mothers in awards of child custody.*

care for their children (Boyd, 2012), through to extremist groups that are overtly or covertly anti-feminist and hostile to women. The activities of fathers' rights groups are typically founded on eliciting anger, on accusations about their former partners and perceptions of loss and absence, and include destructive strategies in court procedures (Flood, 2012). The narratives used by fathers' rights groups stem from the concept of men's deprivation and disadvantaged position compared to women as mothers, who are supposedly favoured by the system of family legislation in the awarding of child custody and resolving of conflicts concerning contacts with the children (Jordan, 2016). As part of men's groups that seek wider rights, fathers' rights groups perceive men as a deprived group, and that the existing state of affairs in gender relations is the result of feminism. The prevalent 'father as a victim discourse' is grounded in the essentialist understanding of gender, the fatherhood-motherhood relationship and the rights of fathers calling for the re-establishing of patriarchal fathering authority along with the hetero-normative visions of the family involving the traditional gender roles (Crowley, 2006; Žakelj, 2008; Flood, 2012; Jordan, 2016).

Father's right movement is defined by the claim that fathers are deprived of their 'rights' and subjected to systematic discrimination as fathers and as men in a system biased towards women and dominated by feminists.
(Flood, 2012: 235)

The main difference between the feminist and the fathers' rights group discourses lies in the understanding of gender roles in relation to childcare. The feminist stand on parenthood and the division of care work is based on a de-essentialist discourse, on an understanding of gender-equal parenting with men and women being equally capable of childcare. On the contrary, the discourse of fathers' rights groups is established on an essentialist understanding of traditional mother and father roles and it is only by fathers gaining 'equal rights' to those held by mothers in child-custody issues that the traditional family values, roles and relations can be revitalised (Crowley, 2006). The prevalent discourse of fathers' rights groups builds on prioritising the principle of formal equality and rights that does not consider the perception of the caring role of man as a father, care practices and responsibilities to children.

Gender-neutral legislation and the gendered practices of institutions

The gender-neutral principle whereby no preference is given to either parent in the court decision on child custody can be found in

family legislation covering the area known today as Slovenia since the 1950s (Žakelj, 2008). What ensures the child's greatest benefit and welfare is the main determinant in custody issues. After the divorce or separation of their parents, children may live with one or the other parent or with both parents (co-parenting) while it is also possible that one child lives with one parent and the other child with another parent (shared parenting) (Žakelj, 2008; Podreka, 2017). Parents can submit the proposal to the court about child custody, while the court decides in cases where parents disagree about the child custody who the more suitable child carer is.

Statistics on divorces involving child custody in the last 30 years in Slovenia show a rise in co-parenting. While in 1985 the share of co-parenting was just 2%, by 2005 it had increased to 11% and by 2016 to 17% (SORS, 2017). At the same time, the share of fathers with full child custody has remained at almost the same level over the last 30 years, ranging between 6% and 8% (ibid.). According to Podreka (2017: 37), the biggest share of fathers with full custody occurs in cases when the court adjudicates on the custody (Podreka, 2017: 37). Among single-parent families, the share of single-parent families with fathers is growing (from 3.2% in 1991 to 6.3% in 2015) (Proposal of the Resolution on Family Policy 2018–2028, 2017: 9).

In her analysis of court decisions on child custody, Žakelj (2008) confirms the gendered practice in evaluating parental care and estimating the more suitable parent. The key factor in the court's decision on awarding child custody is the continuity of care, which implies only apparent gender neutrality. Gender-neutral treatment is vanished with the discourse explaining why one parent is more appropriate than the other for future childcare. Subtle differentiation between the parents gives the impression of natural differences between mother and father as their roles are treated in dissimilar ways in the court's decisions. Žakelj (2008) concludes that motherhood is perceived as a homogeneous category, emphasised by woman's devotion to care for the child, while fatherhood is seen as a heterogeneous category varying from the legitimacy of an absent father to caring fathers. When fathers are awarded full child custody, the court's decision is based on the argument of the appropriateness of the father's care role, including references to persons who help the father in upbringing and caring for the child, most often by pointing to the role of the father's mother or new female partner. In cases where the court awards mother with full child custody, the mother's care role is taken for granted, without questioning about the support expected to be received from an informal social network (such as a new partner, parents, etc.). Parental roles are perceived in court proceedings according to the essentialist gender differentiation of motherhood and fatherhood, which does not allow any inferences that mothers and fathers are not being treated equally by the courts (Žakelj, 2008). However,

fatherhood implies requirements and social expectations other than motherhood (ibid.).

The policy discourse on divorce and child custody is ambivalent because, on one hand, the legislation follows the principle of gender equality and the de-essentialisation of parenthood by giving no preference to either parent. On the other hand, institutional practices (courts, centres for social work) show a more complex picture with trends towards an essentialist understanding of gender and a traditional division of parental roles.

Methodological framework: data collection and sample characteristics

The empirical material comes from interviews with 12 fathers who are primary child carers, conducted in the *Masculinities, Equality, Care Practices* project in the second half of 2018. The sample of men as the primary child carer was mixed with regard to age, education, employment, and monthly income. Six fathers had full custody, three shared, in two cases the custody issues were still to be resolved in court proceedings and in one case an elderly father was taking care of an adult daughter with special needs (where custody was not in question).

The respondents were recruited using the snowball method by relying on the researchers' personal and formal networks, posting a public invitation for an interview on the webpage and social media of the Peace Institute, including sharing the invitation on the social media of non-governmental organisations working in the field of child and family support. Interviews were conducted in homes, working places or public places, as well as in the library of the Peace Institute, depending on an interviewee's wishes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised for the purposes of the analysis. Interview questions related to male experiences with the primary care role, their own stories, how they became a primary carer, how they perceive and practice care work. While aware of the limits of a small and heterogeneous sample, which does not allow generalisations and can lead to fragmented research results, we still believe the results are important since they focus on fathers as primary child carers. In addition, the discussion of caring fatherhood, so far corroborated by many studies based on the experiences of middle-class fathers in heterosexual relationships in Western and Scandinavian countries, now includes heterogeneous masculinities in a post-socialist country.

Table 1: DATA ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES PARTNERS

Pseudo-nyms	Age	Education	Employment status	Monthly income	Gives care to	Full/shared custody
Ivo	37	Secondary vocational education (3 years)	Unemployed	500 €	Son (4)	Full
Slovan	38	Short-cycle Higher education	Fixed term employment	Below-average wage	Daughter (9)	Shared
Damjan	39	Secondary general education (4 years)	Retired due to disability	700 €	Son (5)	Full
Robert	41	Secondary vocational education (3 years)	Retired due to disability	366 €	Daughter (9)	Full
Jan	46	Secondary general education (4 years)	Employed	800 €	2 sons (14, 9) and step daughter (18)	Custody is in court proceeding
Srečko	46	Secondary general education (4 years)	Employed	2,380 €	2 sons (13, 15)	Shared
Aleksander	46	Bologna First-cycle Higher education	Employed	50,000 € – 60,000 € annually per household	Shared parenting for 2 children (13, 18); live with 4 children (2 from previous marriage, 2 from the present marriage)	Shared
Matic	46	Bologna First-cycle Higher education	Self-employed	1,300 €	Son (15)	Full
Darko	49	Bologna First-cycle Higher education	Employed	1,200 €	Daughter (6) and son (4)	Custody is in court proceedings (mother requests full custody)
Marko	53	Compulsory basic education	Unemployed	900 €	Daughter (5) and son (3)	Full
Zvonimir	55	Bologna First-cycle Higher education	Employed	4,000 €	Daughter (13)	Full
Milan	91	Short-cycle higher education	Retired	1,000 €	Daughter (56, special needs)	The main carer of his daughter

Source: Authors' own analysis.

Analysis of the fathers' narratives

Fathers' experiences of institutions: the father as the secondary parent

A subgroup of fathers among the interviewed fathers is unemployed or unemployable due to serious health problems, disability and took on the role of the primary child carer due to the absence of or divorce from their female partner. In a specific set of circumstances linked to the separation from or absence of their partner (the child's mother), or the partner's health problems, these fathers took on primary care for the child. The circumstances relating to the divorce or absence of the female partner were accompanied by job loss or low wages, personal bankruptcy, debt and serious health problems, which led to the drastic deterioration of the socio-economic

position held by this group of interviewees. The narratives of these fathers typically reveal the strong involvement of the social work centres, courts of law, and often the police due to the suspicion of violence and various abuses, as well as non-governmental organisations (e.g. Association of the Friends of Youth, the Botrstvo sponsorship, the Association for Nonviolent Communication), which take on a supportive role in the psycho-social and material respect.

In court proceedings, the fathers also emphasised the support received from their social network, especially their female relatives (mother, sister) who are involved in the childcare. For example, Ivo (37, 1),⁴ who has serious health problems, revealed that his partner left very soon after the child's birth for a health treatment, and never returned. When the court decided on child custody, the mother did not attend the hearing, which the judge commented on: "this is the first time in my career that the mother did not even call to apologise for not being able to come". In court, Ivo requested full child custody and, as the main argument proving his capability to take over the primary carer role, he stressed the full support of his mother and sister in providing the childcare. Ivo believes the court's decision to award him with full custody was probably most affected by the fact the mother did not attend the hearing.

The subgroup of fathers who are socially and economically better situated, with some having shared custody of the child, others waiting for court proceedings, and still others being the primary parent, report negative experiences with institutions while pursuing their parental rights. In his interview, Slovan (38, 1) reveals he faced the difficult situation of divorce and bankruptcy at almost the same time, accompanied by suicidal thoughts. With support, he managed to rebuild his life, which involved the wish to be part of his child's life by requesting shared custody. According to Slovan, the divorce was a long and stressful process largely because the courts and centres for social work prefer mothers to be the primary caregiver of children, while fathers are treated as the secondary parent. He insisted on shared custody, which was achieved, chiefly through good communication and negotiations with his former partner. His closeness with his child may be understood as guiding principle of Slovan's involved fatherhood.

Since being born, my daughter has been more attached to me and, when we divorced, I requested and later demanded shared custody. It was very hard because the centres for social work and courts are not in favour of fathers, so I had to try everything – good communication with the mother and negotiating with her ... As we talked in court and

⁴ The figures in brackets indicate the respondent's age and number of children.

at the centre for social work, the judge said mother will have custody of the child ... So to say, mothers are more suitable for bringing up children than fathers who ... do not have this primary maternal instinct. (Slovan, 38, 1)

Similarly, Darko (49), the father of two children (aged 4 and 6), critically exposes the institutional attitude to man as a father caring for a child following separation from a female partner. The first couple of years after the separation the children lived mainly with their mother, which Darko perceived as a natural fact that children aged up to 2 years need primarily the mother, especially if they're breastfed, while after that age the father's caring role becomes more relevant. Darko and his former partner agreed on co-parenting whereby the children would live for an equal amount of time with him and with their mother. However, the mother filed a court request for full custody. Darko does not reveal the reasons for that, but mostly points to the gender-biased institutions in the process of awarding child custody.

... based on the opinion of the (female) court-appointed expert... I was not asked, who took care of the children in the first four years, the court expert just wrote in the judicial record what my former partner had said ... I thought we both should be asked and be treated equally ... ok, the case about custody is not final yet, but already the court expert has concluded on the basis of one side ... I think that from the very beginning men are treated as less suitable carers. (Darko, 49, 2)

Aleksander (46, 4) reports similar experiences in the centre for social work when seeking to pursue his parental rights. He has shared custody of two children from a previous marriage, and is living with his new partner and their two children. The arrangement with the former wife is based on co-parenting, when every second week four children live with Aleksander and his new female partner.

... With my former wife we had the same interest in the children being ok and she also went with me to the centre for social work when I had problems, because they would not believe me, they thought that I want to cheat them, saying to me, "you just want money" because we actually take care of four children, I had problems explaining this fact to them. My former wife went with me to the centre for social work to confirm and only when she had explained the situation did they believe her. They didn't believe me because it was a bit strange, how men [can care for four children] (Aleksander, 46, 4)

Despite the court's approval of shared custody, which is a precondition for claiming income tax relief for taking care of the children at the centre for social work, Aleksander (46, 4) faced institutional distrust as a primary child carer. Alexander's example clearly shows the gender differentiation of parenthood at the institutional level, which can result in the discrimination and exclusion of fathers who are seeking to pursue their parental rights and responsibilities.

The fathers in the interviews narrated negative experiences with the courts of law and social work centres. They stated that the father's role is not perceived as being equivalent to the role of the mother. Perceptions of the mother's primary and father's secondary parental role apply to the level of institutions, which fathers reported as problematic when adjudicating on child custody.

However, not all experiences with the courts and centres for social work recounted in the interviews were negative. For example, Srečko (46, 2), who lives in a gay partnership, reports that in the divorce process he and former wife prepared an agreement on shared custody of their two children, which the court confirmed without any negative or gender-biased explanation or treatment. Similarly, Matic (46, 1) who has full custody of his son, described a positive experience with the institutions and emphasised the support he had received for his son from the centre for social work. Zvonimir (55, 1), with full custody of his daughter, stressed the supportive experience he had at the centre for social work.

The majority of the fathers' narratives speaks of their negative experiences with the courts and centres social work and the exclusion and discrimination they faced while pursuing their parental rights. The key difference, as seen from the interviews, is in the presence/absence of the mother. Where fathers had full custody, there were no other options for the primary child carer as the mother was either absent or incapable (due to serious health conditions) of caring for the child. In cases of shared child custody, the fathers made great efforts and expressed a request for shared care in courts of law and centres for social work. The institutional discourse is based on questioning the father's caring role and his capabilities to exercise the parental role and responsibilities. The supportive role of female relatives (the father's mother or sister) is emphasised by some fathers as an extra argument used in court to prove their ability to be the primary child carer. Still, this simply confirms the perceptions of gendered parenthood with mothers as the primary child carer, and fathers as the secondary one, that can be found on both the institutional level and the individual level of some of the interviewed fathers.

Involved fatherhood: from traditional to feminist perceptions and practices

In all of the interviews, children and taking care of them occupy central place in the men's lives. Fathers as the primary child carer provide complete care for their children, including domestic tasks, which some of them had to learn after taking over the care for their child(ren). They strive to ensure the best possible care for their child(ren), which includes single-parent fathers who are socially and economically strongly disadvantaged, mostly by meeting their child's basic needs in terms of food, health, clothing and play. Socio-economically better situated fathers place quality relationships with their children in foreground, and see the opportunity to offer them something more in their development as being crucial in childcare.

They hold mixed perceptions of care and parental role and include more traditional and instrumental beliefs of caring for a child as well as a gender-equal understanding of care whereby both men and women are equally capable of parenting.

In some of the fathers' narratives, the perception of mother/father roles is based on gender differentiation originating from biological differences between women and men. Some fathers see differences between mother and father in terms of their deficiency. The fact that only women can give birth and breastfeed, where a special connection between mother and child is formed, which can never be developed in the relationship between father and child, occupies centre place in the gender differentiation of parental roles. Ivo (37, 1) explains that "men are equally capable of taking care of the child, but the difference is in mother's love, in her hugs" and, irrespective of his efforts to care for the child, he feels that his parental role is deficient compared to the mother's role. On the other hand, some fathers expressed contra-narratives. In their view, emotional connectedness and parental care are not related to the gender of the parent, but are part of the care relationship that develops between parent and child. Matic (46, 1) emphasises that maternal love for the child is being exaggerated in society as something fathers are incapable of, by explaining that "you [as a man] can be as gentle as a woman can, you can be loving and gentle as a father or as a woman".

Interviews with the fathers who are the primary child carer provide valuable insights into men's caring involvement in their private lives. The complexity of the care experiences and practices of the interviewed fathers have changed their attitude to care work and their own position in the care relationship. In some narratives, involved fatherhood includes gender-equal perceptions and practices. For example, Milan (91) is an elderly man with care experiences in both professional and private life. He recognises the care experiences obtained in his professional work as bringing an advantage in terms of the skills, knowledge and competencies that were of help

when taking over the care of his ill wife and daughter with special needs. His wife had passed away a few years before and, despite his age, he is still involved in caring for his adult daughter (aged 56) with special needs. In his view, “man needs to do the washing, cleaning, cooking, caring and all those things are part of the lives of both men and women”. Milan’s participation in private and professional care is an example of caring masculinities leading to gender-equal masculinities. On the contrary, in some of the fathers’ narratives, involved fatherhood includes traits of traditional masculinity like authority, control, emotional detachment and essentialist understandings of gender roles. These narratives show that involved fatherhood in all its complexity does not necessarily carry the potential for gender equality.

Conclusion

In the context of contemporary fatherhood, we observe ambivalent discourses where, on one hand, feminist and gender equality discourses stand for equality in parenthood, the equal sharing of care responsibilities among partners. On the other hand, the anti-feminist initiatives promoted by men’s groups and fathers’ rights groups that call for a re-traditionalisation of gender roles and the nuclear family model cannot be ignored. The vital difference is that fathers’ rights groups are striving for formal equality in child custody, which does not imply any efforts towards gender-equal parenting and an equal share of caring and upbringing of the child(ren) between partners. Moreover, the caring role of man as a father along with care practices and responsibilities towards children are absent in the discourse of fathers’ rights groups. On the policy level, the discourse is based on the principle of gender equality and de-essentialist perceptions of parenthood as part of the family legislation, while the institutional practices show a complex picture, including essentialist perceptions of gender and the traditional division of parenting roles.

In the interviews with the fathers, we observe perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood where biological difference is explained as the main denominator in understanding the role of the mother as the primary child carer and the father’s role as the secondary parent that supplements the mother’s role. Despite the greater involvement of contemporary fathers in childcare identified by Žakelj (2008), parental roles in court child custody proceedings are being treated according to the socio-historical motherhood/fatherhood distinction, which does not mean the unequal treatment of mothers and fathers, but different expectations, demands and beliefs regarding fatherhood and motherhood. Involved fatherhood has still to become part of the discourse on parental roles at the institutional level (courts, centres for social work) (ibid.).

The narratives of the different social groups of interviewed fathers speak of systemic inequality and discrimination (Bailey, 2015). Men are perceived and treated as secondary parents due to the perception of maternal care for the child as the primary parental role, which is deeply embedded in society, institutions, policies and everyday practices. Single fathers who are either primary carers or have shared custody engage in variations of the marginalised (low socio-economic situation, poverty, serious health problems and illnesses) and hegemonic and complicit masculinities (well situated, heterosexual, educated, healthy). Changes like divorce, job loss, serious illness, and full or shared child custody produced changes in masculinities. Men's involvement in care work enables the transformation of men's caring attitudes and affects how they reconstruct their identities, which brings the potential for a change in gender relations (Coltrane, 1996; Hanlon, 2012). Fatherhood and heterogeneous masculinities are represented by traits of involved fatherhood including more traditional masculine elements, such as control, decisiveness as well as more gender-equal perceptions and practices (Björk, 2013). Fatherhood and fathering practices must be understood as an "active project" (*ibid.*), as also observed in the fathers' narratives showing transformations of their fathering role. The interviews with the fathers reveal a wide range of experiences and practices of caring masculinities, also involving elements of traditional masculinity like determination, control and, in one case, membership in a fathers' rights group with expressions of anger against women and gays. Therefore, our interviews do not show that caring masculinities can be equated with gender-equal masculinities.

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