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Involving fathers in family social services in Israel: in the shadow of a conflicted policy

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While it is widely accepted that social work interventions are more productive when they include fathers, fathers are largely left out of child and family social service interventions in Israel and most Western countries. Current research worldwide focuses on the role that fathers, mothers and social workers play in causing this phenomenon. In this article, we shed light on the importance of a fourth element: the policy-making process. In a case study of Israeli social services, we interviewed leading bureaucrats and policy makers regarding their position on engaging fathers and identified three main conflicts hindering policy makers' ability and motivation to promote policy favouring father engagement: a gendered profession conflict, a political conflict, and an ethical conflict. We show how these conflicts, each emerging from a different sphere, together create a conflict-ridden environment that may explain policy makers' lack of action. Finally, we provide our conclusion and discuss the limitations of the study.

Key words social policy • family welfare services • social work • gender • fatherhood.

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Introduction

The involvement of fathers in family social services is a central issue in contemporary welfare policy discourse. It is widely accepted that father engagement is beneficial to child development (Tully et al, 2017) and that social work interventions are more effective when they include fathers (Brewsaugh and Strozier, 2016; Brewsaugh et al, 2018). Despite this understanding, however, fathers are largely left out of child and family social service interventions (Scourfield, 2014; Scourfield et al, 2014) in Israel and most Western countries. Researchers identify three primary reasons for this: fathers' reluctance to access the services, gatekeeping by mothers, and the services themselves (mainly the attitude and stance of social workers in the field).

In this article, we wish to shed light on the importance of a fourth element – the policy-making process: specifically, policy makers' position on engaging fathers in family social services. We focused on policy makers' views regarding two aspects of this issue: fathers as clients, and the fieldworkers' role in integrating fathers. Additionally, we asked whether gender perceptions shape the construction of policy on integrating fathers.

We examined these issues through a case study of leading bureaucrats at the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) and identified three main conflicts hindering their ability and motivation to promote policy favouring father engagement:

- (1) A gendered profession conflict: the female social worker versus the male client
- (2) A political conflict: policy makers, feminists, and men's organisations
- (3) An ethical conflict: treating fathers who are absent or violent

Literature review

Policy makers' perceptions and beliefs have taken centre stage in the analysis of public and social policy in recent years. While the literature on policy making has traditionally focused on institutional and organisational factors affecting policy making, there is a new trend towards stressing the importance of ideas – their role not only in shaping policy, but also in influencing actors' interactions with non-ideational factors (Béland and Cox, 2011; Béland and Howlett, 2016). However, very little research exists on the topic of policy makers' ideas on the engagement of fathers in family social services.

In most Western countries, the stance adopted by family social services towards fathers reflects a fundamental tension. On the one hand, it is well established that including fathers in professional social work interventions – that is, bringing fathers into the picture when providing psychosocial therapy, including financial aid and emotional support – is beneficial to children, families and fathers (Featherstone, 2013; Clapton, 2017). On the other hand, most interventions in Israel and some Western countries do not include fathers. Quantitative data on father engagement is notoriously hard to come by, but qualitative data from various welfare states shows that most services targeted at families interact most extensively with mothers (Brown et al, 2009; Zanoni et al, 2013; Baum, 2015).

There is ample evidence that including fathers in interventions has a variety of immediate and long-term benefits to children on the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and educational levels (Panter-Brick et al, 2014; Tully et al, 2017). Conversely, some studies suggest that children in households with less-involved fathers are more likely to use drugs, have increased educational needs, and exhibit more health, emotional and behavioural problems than children with involved fathers (Horn and Sylvester, 2002).

Despite these facts, research shows that in Western countries, fathers today are still largely outside the purview of social workers (Zanoni et al, 2013). Brown et al (2009) point to how the organisational structure of family social services contributes to their failure to engage fathers, how the tendency to assume that gendered caring roles exist in the family, thereby encouraging services to work with mothers, and

how the preference to work with one main contact person leads to the exclusion of fathers (Nygren et al, 2019).

The absence of fathers is consistent throughout various fields of social work. Low father engagement has been documented in parenting programmes (Philip and O'Brien, 2017), out-of-home care for children (Baum and Negbi, 2013), domestic violence interventions (Pfitzner et al, 2017), and substance abuse interventions (Peled et al, 2012).

Female versus male power dynamic

One main difficulty that family social services experience when attempting to engage fathers stems from gender dynamics. The vast majority of social workers are women. Social work in Western countries as well as in Israel was originated by and historically done by women, since they were in charge of family supervision and maintaining the traditional bourgeois social order (Halpern, 2019). However, female social workers and male clients are in a head-to-head power relationship, where the social worker holds power stemming from her professional status, while the father holds power bestowed by men's privileged status in society (Bundy-Fazioli et al, 2009).

Fathers as a risk versus fathers as a resource

Another issue at play in the inclusion of fathers in social service interventions is the tug of war between the view of fathers as a risk to the mother and family and the view of fathers themselves as being a resource to them.

The 'risk' view comes partly from the fact that female professionals often misinterpret fathers' expressions of distress. They fail to relate to these emotions and understand their consequences (Brown et al, 2009; Baum, 2015). During the 1990s, attention was increasingly directed towards the absence of fathers from intervention plans (Featherstone, 2009; Baum, 2015). This attention originated in an approach that perceived men as a risk to women, and working with violent men was seen as a way to reduce this risk (Sarkadi et al, 2008). However, it is violent behaviour, not a violent perpetrator's gender, that makes the perpetrator a risk, a fact that often got lost in the 'men equal risk' world view.

On a parallel level, fathers began to be viewed by family services as a resource on the economic and parental level (Lewis, 2001). As the number of single-parent families grew, the absence of fathers in these families was seen as a disadvantage to their children (East et al, 2006).

Child protection services, mainly in neoliberal welfare states, began to harshly judge fathers' parental functioning and focused increasingly on punishing 'absent' fathers, termed 'deadbeat dads' in the US (Brown et al, 2009; Maxwell et al, 2012; Featherstone, 2013; Baum, 2015; Brewsaugh and Strozier, 2016). To correct the absence, social services in the US and the UK started to operate targeted programmes – defined psychosocial treatment by social workers solely for fathers – in order to encourage fathers to interact with their children. These programmes attempted to strengthen the father's role in the family and emphasised the father-child relationship (McCarthy et al, 2013).

Risk and resource views: both counterproductive

The risk/resource dichotomy reflects differing views regarding the function of fathers, but both sides of the dichotomy perceive fathers functionally – through their effect on their family, mainly their children, rather than as subjects, human beings with feelings, needs and motivations (Featherstone, 2013).

This attitude is not only contrary to the social work ethos, specifically social workers' ethos of working with parents to promote their children's welfare (Ewart-Boyle et al, 2015), but also counterproductive to engaging fathers. Perceiving fathers functionally, either as risks or as resources, leads to a minimal and very mechanical interaction between them and family social services. Mothers are left as the interacting link to fathers, who are either utilised as assets or avoided as risks. As Brown et al (2009: 30) aptly put it, 'Social workers manage mothers, and in turn, mothers manage fathers.'

Such an approach by family social services damages fathers' ability to retain contact with their children and compromises their human rights (Gupta and Featherstone, 2015). It also places an additional burden on mothers, who, along with being expected to fill the role of both parents, are now also required to monitor and control the behaviour of the fathers (Krane and Davies, 2000).

According to O'Donnell et al (2005), most of the intervention programmes in place to improve father engagement were deficient on several levels. First, they dictated that fathers take part in a particular activity, such as reading to their children, and not in everyday parental tasks, such as making medical appointments. In doing so, they preserved inequality instead of challenging it. Second, mothers were perceived in the eyes of family social services as a bridge between the services and the fathers. In this position, mothers were often reluctant to bring fathers into the picture, which worked against attempts by the services to engage the fathers. Mothers sometimes even refused to identify the father. As a result, even while family social services tried to involve fathers in parental care and as users of services, they were actually preserving the role of the mother as the principal figure responsible for the family, responsible both for parental tasks and for the father, while ignoring the power relations in society and the historical, inherent, and tangible gender inequality that exists towards women and mothers.

Ideological-political conflict

Another source of difficulty in engaging fathers is an ideological-political conflict. At the core of social work practice is a desire to deal with discrimination and oppression. Accordingly, as part of the feminist movement in the 1980s, the practice of social work began to emphasise the unique position of women (Pollack and Rossiter, 2010). This movement worked to change the patriarchal structures that oppressed women as welfare users and to place women at the centre of social work practice. According to some critics, while this change has provided much-needed assistance to excluded and marginalised women, it has sometimes created 'men blindness' among social workers (Cavanagh and Cree, 1996). Even though men are a privileged population as compared to women, not all men enjoy equal access to the structures of gender domination, as social workers might ignore, to some extent, factors such as sexuality, race, disability and age, which influence social status and often lead to the oppression of many men.

Therefore, some male social services clients, described as non-powerful men (Pease, 2000), have been marginalised by social service professionals based on their class, sexuality, level of competence, and ethnic or racial origin.

The correction of inequality, according to some feminists (Featherstone, 2010; McCarthy et al, 2013), can only be achieved by looking deeply at gender inequality in society, even at the cost of creating inequality towards men (a group that is traditionally privileged) and ignoring class issues and other power relationships. They argue that attempting to create equality in the welfare system while blatantly ignoring gender inequalities in society creates conflict and preserves inequality. In Israeli society, there is an extensive public debate about the change in fathers' roles and the increasing involvement of fathers in the care of their children. However, this discussion has been absent from the social policy-making arena, where the focus when it comes to fathers is mainly on divorce and questions of custody and alimony payments (see, for example, as a partial sample, Hecker and Halperin-Kaddari, 2013; Mazeh and Giron, 2015). Israeli social services for families has been characterised by a significant rift between the image that the Israeli welfare state would like to project and the reality experienced by those on the receiving end of social services.

The Israeli case

While the State of Israel – and the Israeli welfare state – are perceived as progressing in gender equality, the reality is much bleaker. Israel is characterised by a high marriage rate, high birth rate, low marriage age, and low divorce rate relative to other Western countries (Toren, 2003). The centrality of the family institution in Israel limits the range of possibilities for women (and men). The welfare state does not work to free women, but rather to bind them to this institution (Ajzenstadt and Gal, 2001; Herbst and Benjamin, 2012; Herbst, 2013). For example, the State of Israel declares itself to be a supporter of childbirth and families. In practice, however, this support is provided only for the process of bringing a child into the world – from support for fertility treatments through support for the difficulties during pregnancy and childbirth. After birth, the state gives minimal assistance to families trying to support their children, thus preserving the mother's position as the primary care provider (Renan Barzilay, 2012; Shenhav-Goldberg et al, 2019).

Family welfare services in Israel consist of 253 departments scattered throughout the country. The majority of practitioners are social workers who work with families (that is, a parent or child or both). The majority of service users are mothers and children at risk, and most welfare resources are directed at protecting these children, with emphasis on safeguarding the child rather than working with the family as a whole (Sinai-Glazer and Peled, 2017).

Specifically, the range of social policies regarding fathers has been limited and the benefits and assistance provided modest. Moreover, these benefits do not focus on promoting father engagement in the household, but rather on promoting mother engagement in the workforce (Halpern, 2019).

While research on fathers' engagement with social services in Israel is not abundant, the research that does exist shows a pattern similar to what has been documented earlier in this article. For example, there is a pattern of social workers being reluctant to engage with fathers (Baum, 2015), holding on to gender-based perceptions of parenthood (Davidson-Arad et al, 2008), having difficulty identifying the feelings

expressed by fathers (Baum and Negbi, 2013), and more. Therefore, the working assumption of this article is that findings from the Israeli system are, to a high degree, relevant to other Western contexts and systems.

Research questions

After reviewing the academic literature described above, we formulated five main questions for examination: (a) What are policy makers' views on involving fathers as clients? (b) Have Israeli social service policy makers begun to recognise the importance of engaging fathers as they work to improve the services provided to families and children? (c) What are the existing policies, and how are they implemented in practice by family social service workers? (d) How do policy makers perceive the fieldworkers' role in integrating fathers? (e) What gender perceptions shape the construction of policy on integrating fathers into welfare work?

Methodology

Method

This study employed a qualitative model of policy research that included a categorical analysis of interviews, with the goal of understanding the internal structures of the phenomena revealed and mapping their range, nature and dynamics. Typologies were then identified based on the gathered information, and different types of attitudes, behaviours and motivations were categorised, and links between experiences, attitudes, circumstances, strategies and actions were found. Explicit or implicit explanations for the phenomena were generated.

For this study, nine interviews were conducted with top bureaucrats in the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA), most of whom were employed by the Department of Personal and Social Services (DSS) within MOLSA and participated in writing the guidelines relevant to this article's topic. For interviewees, we chose general supervisors and deputies in the field of child protection and family welfare, and one leading figure in masculinity studies at the national social work continuing education school. Additionally, all interviewees were trained social workers who worked in family social services. The interviewee recruiting process consisted of identifying the leading figures in charge of family social services within MOLSA and simply asking them to take part in the study. This was followed by snowball sampling, where each interviewee was asked to provide names of others who might supply relevant data. Since 90 per cent of the leading administrators at DSS are women, and they specifically mentioned that social work in Israel is a female-dominated field, we decided to regard female identity as the main factor in understanding the policy makers' point of view.

The interviews were semi-structured and began with a general question regarding policies on fathers. This was done to allow interviewees to openly and freely introduce their agendas and world views on engaging fathers. Further into the interview, we tried to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific views the interviewees held and the policies they were putting forth. A preliminary research guide (Figure 1) was assembled to ensure that the several issues we considered to be key were all addressed, even if they had not been discussed in the interviewee's

Figure 1: Preliminary research guide

Preliminary research guide (figure 1)

1. Please tell us about your current position and work routine.
2. Please share with us your world view regarding involving fathers as clients of family social services.
3. Please share with us your professional perspective on the differences between mothers and fathers as social work clients.
4. What is your personal view on the differences between men and women?
5. What are the obstacles to engaging fathers as social work clients?
6. How do you think it is possible to increase fathers' involvement in social work treatment for the family?

answer to the opening question of the interview. As the research unfolded, the research guide was modified accordingly. The interviews varied in length as needed but lasted 60 minutes on average.

Ethics

The study's detailed proposal was approved by a qualified ethics committee of Ashkelon Academic College and authorised by MOLSA. Both parties thoroughly discussed the project and the significance as well as the ethical dilemmas of the research.

It was important to be mindful of the interviewees' possible fear of being exposed or criticised and resulting reluctance to disclose their thoughts fully. To address this issue and to protect the identity of the interviewees (Saunders et al, 2015), each was given the option to stay anonymous. Even though some interviewees allowed their names to be revealed, and confirmed the citations mentioned in this paper, all interviewees names and specific roles within the MOLSA were anonymised.

Analysis

Due to the limited number of interviews, we chose to conduct a qualitative–categorical analysis of them. We identified repeating words, phrases and declarations in the transcripts of the interviews, coded them into categories and themes (Connolly, 2003), and identified a typology of the main themes. We then conducted a reliability test by having three researchers, all of whom were social work scholars (two with PhDs and one with an MA) working at the same institution on this research project, analyse the texts independently, after which their analyses were compared and discussed over several sessions. The resulting agreed-on conclusions reflect the policy makers' conflicting perspectives on fathers as clients of social services.

Findings

Introduction

This study found that leading policy bureaucrats involved in family social services in MOLSA hold differing views on the role of fathers and on the attitude that family social services should adopt towards fathers. Moreover, a central theme in the interviewees' comments was the gap between a declared commitment to engaging the whole family and actual efforts to do so in practice: "The ministry has, of course, a policy that does not discriminate between men and women, but in practice, the social services' clients are mainly women" (anonymous interview BB).

This does not necessarily mean that the ministry discriminates against men. Instead, it indicates that efforts to include men are not made in earnest or do not succeed. The ministry's declared policy is to be gender neutral and to examine the entire familial system rather than focusing on clients of a specific gender, and MOLSA has made some practical attempts to promote the integration of fathers: "I envision setting up a forum for experts from the field of family counselling to examine this issue" (anonymous interview DD).

Fathers are still labelled only under the category of 'parents' or 'family' and are not considered a separate client group for social services. All interviewees recognised men or fathers as an undertreated group, meaning men make up a smaller percentage of social workers' clients than women, and men do not get the same 'dosage' or type of treatment as women: "The fact is, even in two-parent families, women are the more frequent clients of social services" (anonymous interview DD).

Most interviewees placed the primary responsibility for this situation on the social workers within DSS. According to one interviewee, most social workers in field practice prefer working with mothers because of "a paternalistic attitude that we know everything", while only a minority of social workers come "from a place of respect and equality with the client (treating both the mother and the father)" (anonymous interview AA). At the same time, it appears that if steps *are* taken to promote father engagement, they are also most often the result of individual initiative on the part of social work practitioners, not policy makers: "Reality proves that when [social workers] make an effort and reach out to the father, he is more significant in the child's life" (Dalia Lev-Sadeh).

However, along with asserting the central role of the social workers, some interviewees revealed an understanding of MOLSA's responsibility and influence:

'It is a matter of training the employees ... This is definitely something that MOLSA does and is working on.' (anonymous interview AA)

'We should promote these processes within our system ... So, everyone has a responsibility.' (Dalia Lev-Sadeh)

Other interviewees stressed budgetary barriers stemming from government policy as a main obstacle for field practitioners. DSS is intensively overloaded with cases, struggling to expand its workforce in order to give more attention to each client:

'It is especially challenging for social workers, who are responsible for huge caseloads, to invest time and effort in reaching out to men who are reluctant to come for help. I want the state to recognise that a social worker cannot effectively handle 200 families at one time.' (anonymous interview DD)

The level of resources available to social workers is an issue that needs to be acknowledged. It was found that with resources being scarce, mothers are prioritised; as the main carer, they are the immediate focus (in the interests of the children), and absent fathers are regarded as secondary (Halpern et al, n.d.-a).

Three central conflicts

Along with these technical-structural issues, an in-depth investigation of the interviews identified three fundamental conflicts that complicate the creation of policies on integrating fathers into family social services: (1) a gendered profession conflict – the female social worker versus the male client; (2) a political conflict – policy makers, feminists and men's organisations; and (3) an ethical conflict – treating fathers who are absent or violent.

Gendered profession conflict: the female social worker versus the male client

The first conflict the interviewees experienced regards the tension between male clients' masculinity and the social work profession's femininity. The fact that many social workers are women does not by itself mean they oppose the inclusion of fathers. Hence, this conflict does not arise from the worker's or the client's biological sex, but rather from conflicting gender attitudes and norms as perceived by the interviewees:

'It's hard to reach out to [men] in the familiar ways that we know for women. Most social workers are women, connecting with women [clients], so we must think of ways to bring men into treatment.' (anonymous interview BB)

This fundamental gap leads to severe obstacles, including social workers lacking knowledge on how to approach and reach out to men and lacking the tools for doing so, and fathers holding a negative image of social work as being inherently feminine (Halpern et al, n.d.-b). Given that MOLSA's DSS is composed mostly of women, some interviewees perceived MOLSA's policy on fathers through their own eyes as women, looking at fathers as the 'other': "As a woman, it is easier to connect with women than to connect with men because connecting with men really requires something else within our system" (anonymous interview BB).

Most of the interviewees perceived masculinity as being the opposite of femininity. They identified emotional exposure, help seeking and therapeutic discourse with femininity, and concrete, unemotional communication with masculinity, and in general perceived men as the opposite of women and antithetical to social work language:

'The mere fact that a man turns to social services is a recognition or confession of his weakness, and no man wants to be in that place, certainly not a man who was constantly raised from the moment he was born to be the strong one, to be the hero.' (anonymous interview CC)

This feminine-masculine contrast embedded within social services can lead to female social workers failing to understand the unique language and needs of men and feeling helpless and unknowledgeable about how to treat them: "With women, it's much faster, it goes there. With men it's a bit ... It's a language that needs to be found when you try to connect" (anonymous interview BB).

This feminine-masculine contrast is socially constructed in the organisation: "The target population that usually reaches social welfare departments is mothers, and it is easy to treat them. The connection to the fathers, the reaching out that is needed to bring them to therapy, has never been a top priority, and really neglected" (anonymous interview BB).

The same dominance of women in the profession both deters men from seeking treatment and creates the need to actively reach out to them. It exacerbates the gender gap and alienation between social workers and fathers: "I have had difficulty recruiting men ... I have often encountered men's resistance to family intervention when the mother is more cooperative ... And it is convenient to work with a collaborator" (anonymous interview GG).

It seems that a gender perception among Israeli MOLSA policy makers that dichotomises men and women is leading to fundamental professional difficulties in engaging fathers.

Political conflict: policy makers, feminists and men's organisations

The modern gender discourse which encourages an egalitarian model between men and women, was perceived by all interviewees as a progressive change that has decreased gender differences and conflicts and would enable engaging fathers better:

'You never used to see men in babies' health centres, and today you see a lot ... You never used to see men on maternity leave, and today you do ... It's way beyond welfare services, it's a constellation of integrating men in raising children, parenting, and also in dealing with crises and distress within the family ...' (anonymous interview GG)

The same interviewees who perceived basic differences between the sexes, as described in the previous subsection, also objected to this dichotomy. One interviewee claimed the following:

'In the professional world view I don't see any difference. True, as a woman it is easier to identify with the woman's distress, especially if she complains about the man ... But I don't think there should be any difference (from a professional point of view).' (anonymous interview FF)

Other interviewees sought to challenge the mainstream construction of gender by striving to understand "how the profession needs to improve its image, so that men can come more" and to "see how to create the trust so that they really agree to receive any help from the system" (anonymous interview AA).

One interviewee sought to gain this trust by challenging the gendered construction of violence in which men are the ultimate aggressors and women are always the victims. This interviewee named out loud a rarely discussed phenomena: "It is true that there are also men who have been subjected to violence by women" (anonymous interview AA).

The aspiration for equality, especially regarding women's rights, is at the heart of the social work profession since social workers work mainly with the disadvantaged members of society, such as women. But it seems that some of the interviewees believed that the feminist struggle for equality in social work *creates* a certain degree of inequality due to its blindness to the needs of men: "Women really want equal rights but sometimes forget that this equality of rights is also the father having equal rights as the mother, and then there are struggles" (anonymous interview EE).

This leads to a political conflict affecting the treatment of men, who are still seen as risk posers:

'The profession sits on the fence in this struggle between the sexes. Women's organisations that pronounce in this strong voice, "Do not say that men are victims since most of the victims are women," but we keep saying that even if the man is the one who acts violently, in the end we still think that this is another way to express his distress.' (anonymous interview CC)

Hence, efforts to understand fathers' needs, something demanded often nowadays by men's organisations, creates tension and possibly even an inner dissonance among the Israeli MOLSA policy makers: "Men's movements, which sometimes attack us very

aggressively and violently, are also forcing us to think differently and to give them a place, too. I do not justify their violence and shaming, but I think that they have rights no less than women” (anonymous interview FF).

Therefore, political changes may have forced or drastically encouraged female policy makers to shift from their tendency to identify with women to also understanding men. This new understanding of masculinity has set into motion factors that, in the eyes of the interviewees, will facilitate the issue of engaging fathers. However, despite exerting pressure to understand men, the above-mentioned political conflict between feminists and men’s organisations is at present hindering more than helping, since fathers are still not engaged in the treatment of family social workers.

Ethical conflict: treating fathers who are absent or violent

A few interviewees emphasised the importance of engaging fathers regardless of how present or absent they are in the family’s day-to-day life. Their view was based on a humanistic ideology of social work as a human rights profession (Ife, 2012) that perceives fathers as equals and separate subjects:

‘I think that men deserve a feeling of well-being, I think men also deserve social services that fit their needs ... We want men to utilise our services so that we can help them to try to live better, more meaningful lives, and to be able to connect with all social systems. Yes, I want them to be my clients.’ (anonymous interview DD)

However, fulfilling this wish could be impeded by the challenge of reaching out to fathers who do not cooperate with social services (as opposed to mothers, who do). Social workers may know that fathers should be included and that this results in better outcomes, but they may not have the resources for this, as demonstrated earlier. Policy makers should take resourcing into account. But in addition to this practical aspect, there is the moral aspect:

‘There are some approaches that come out and say a father that is absent from his child life, where is his responsibility? And why should social workers try to involve him? So on the one hand, I support the rights approach towards fathers, but on the other hand, the legal system in Israel does not emphasise the parents’ obligation and responsibility.’ (anonymous interview EE)

Here there was a split between the abovementioned desire to advocate for men and acknowledge them as subjects who are entitled to welfare and treatment, and the more judgemental and moralistic social work approach that expects the clients to take full responsibility, specifically expecting fathers to be functioning members of their families for the children’s sake. In other words, at play is the discourse of rights against the discourse of obligations:

‘There are some approaches which criticise the father who chooses not to be a part of his child’s life. How could he allow himself to do this and then expect that social workers make an effort for him? It was his choice to have a child and it’s his responsibility.’ (anonymous interview EE)

While this interviewee acknowledged that the more dominant discourse in Israel is the rights discourse, there is a tension between the two approaches among social workers. This tension is also related to the manner in which the law treats fathers:

‘The law speaks of parents as parents without distinction, and therefore the child is entitled, in terms of the rights of the child, to have a father as well as a mother, so our job in this profession is to make every effort to have a relationship with the parents, whether it’s the mother or the father.’ (Dalia Lev-Sadeh)

Another factor that affects attitudes towards fathers is domestic violence:

‘Reality proves that it is women who are injured and murdered and are at a higher risk due to domestic violence.’ (anonymous interview CC)

‘[There is a] fear of the intimidating man that paralyses us and that we need to work on.’ (anonymous interview FF)

Nevertheless, social worker’s professional identity and training is helpful encourages an empathic attitude towards aggressive masculine behaviour, with some interviewees recognising that sometimes violence is a form of frustration expression, even if a problematic one: “Some of this violent behaviour towards social workers derives from these divorced fathers who need to be recognised” (anonymous interview GG).

However, there is also an attempt to be neutral and state that “our policies many times do not reflect what we think ... I mean, they are a result of the data, the needs that are brought to our attention” (anonymous interview CC).

This quote seems to express very well the conflicted, confused and incoherent policy of the main actors within the DSS towards fathers, and the lack of clear guidelines for navigating the ethical, gendered profession and political conflicts when treating fathers.

Discussion

The pattern that emerges from this bottom-up qualitative research of policy makers’ attitudes is one of conflict and contradiction. The three conflicts portrayed in this article place the interviewees in very unsettled and unclear territory, where they often encounter difficulties in paving the way for a clear guidelines in how to treat fathers. The three conflicts reported by interviewees all duplicate, correspond to, or echo conflicts and dilemmas reported in previous research.

The gendered profession conflict most directly reflects the conflicts reported in previous research. Interviewees pointed to how social work, as a female profession, has difficulty relating to father clients, both because of perceived gender differences and because of social workers’ lack of knowledge on how to work with men. This conflict echoes the tensions between female workers and father clients described by Bundy-Fazioli et al (2009), Baum (2015), and others.

It can be seen that the gendered professional conflict originates at the field level and replicates itself at the top bureaucratic level. It does so in two distinct ways. First, the interviewees – all social workers and mostly women – experienced the gendered profession conflict first hand. Second, the interviewees also report witnessing the

conflict and its outcomes as an obstacle preventing workers in the services they are in charge of from effectively engaging fathers.

The political conflict, placing policy makers in the line of fire between feminist organisations and men's rights groups, as in other Western countries ([Fathers Network Scotland, 2013; 2016a; 2016b](#)), represents a different pattern. Here, policy makers are not experiencing a conflict originating in social work fieldwork. Instead, this is a conflict that originates in a different arena, the gender politics arena.

The ethical conflict, reflecting dilemmas reported in existing literature, arrives via yet another route. The tension between allocating resources to engage what interviewees defined as 'hard-to-reach fathers' and allocating these resources to mothers who could greatly benefit from them has been described in previous literature by theorists such as [Featherstone \(2010\)](#) and [McCarthy et al \(2013\)](#) not as a conflict experienced by workers in the field but rather as a theoretical conflict.

Thus, surveying the conflicts policy makers face in engaging fathers in family social services, the picture that emerges is one of a nexus of conflicts. Each of the three conflicts policy makers describe originates in a different domain, with the gendered professional conflict arising from fieldwork, the political conflict migrating from a different policy field, and the ethical conflict being the manifestation of a conflict that was previously described only theoretically.

We have shown that leading bureaucrats in MOLSA, and specifically in its DSS, are becoming aware of the importance of engaging fathers on the one hand. On the other hand, they acknowledge that a lot more still needs to be done to promote the engagement of fathers as a separate and undertreated client group. All interviewees emphasised in one way or another the insufficiency of what has been done to date to include fathers. Additionally, it is evident that policy makers have taken no explicit action towards specifically training or supervising social workers on this matter.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the position of policy makers on engaging fathers in family social services in Israel. These policy makers acknowledge the importance of father engagement but are not using their power to promote programmes that engage fathers. We have demonstrated how this failure stems from their unique position in the nexus of three distinct conflicts: professional, political and ethical. While each of these conflicts originates in a different domain, they all meet in the policy-making arena. Moreover, the policy makers' failure to act highlights their lack of professional agency. These interviewees work in an overburdened and conflicted system that does not empower them with the agency they need to inspire and drive the change towards engaging fathers. Additionally, traditional and conservative perceptions of family gender roles in Israel seem to have an impact on the disengagement of fathers.

The implications of this study are varied. As can be surmised from our findings, policy makers' professional and personal views play a significant role in engaging fathers as clients of family social services. These views are varied and sometimes contradictory and are worthy of further examination. Our findings also shine a light on the significant influence of the policy makers' female identity on this matter. This identity must be considered when looking at the actors in the field of welfare policy.

At the same time, our findings prove that the complexity of the issue notwithstanding, policy makers do believe that fathers are a significant client group that should receive more services. Our findings also show that social work schools and policy makers themselves should provide fieldworkers with the appropriate tools, orientation and tailored supervision required to work with this population.

Finally, we wish to note that this study was limited, as it relied on interviews of a small number of actors in the welfare policy arena. Future studies would do well to examine other administrators and to compare the attitudes of male and female policy makers, as well as to interview social workers at the field level as we did in our recent study (Halpern et al, n.d.-a). Indeed, relying on interviews with policy makers may obscure processes at the field level, either because policy makers are not aware of them or because they wish to paint a bright picture of the services. Also, further analysis could have been done by additional researchers, thus strengthening the reliability test. Moreover, divorce disputes, though not directly related to family social services in Israel, should be further investigated with regards to child welfare, as the centrality of divorce disputes to fathers' involvement in their children's welfare and the concept of such disputes as a 'battlefield' have been documented in the literature (Hecker and Halperin-Kaddari, 2013; Mazeh and Miron, 2015). Finally, to understand the broader context surrounding the formation of policy regarding fathers and family social services, studies should examine the legislative process – its past, present and future – as it concerns the issue at hand.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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