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

## Abstract

While it is widely accepted that father engagement is beneficial to child development and that social work interventions that include fathers are more productive, world wide current research focuses on the role of fathers, mothers, and social workers in fathers’ absence.

In this paper, we wish to shed light on the importance of a fourth element – the policymaking process. We achieve this through a case study of the Israeli social services, interviewing leading bureaucrats and policymakers regarding their positions towards engaging fathers.

We identified that policymakers face three main conflicts, hindering their ability and motivation to promote policy favoring father engagement – a professional-gendered conflict, a political conflict, and an ethical conflict.

We will show how each of these conflicts emerges from a different sphere, creating a conflict-ridden environment that may explain policy makers’ lack of action. Finally, we provide our closing conclusion and discuss the limitations of the study.

**Keywords**: Social Policy, Social Services, Social Work, Gender, Family, Fatherhood, Israel.

## Introduction

The involvement of fathers in the family social services is a central issue in the discourse of contemporary welfare policy. It is widely accepted that father engagement is beneficial to child development (Tully et al., 2017), and that social work interventions that include fathers are more effective (Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018; Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). However, despite this understanding, fathers are absent from interventions in the field of child and family social services (Scourfield, 2014; Scourfield, Cheung, & Macdonald, 2014). Researchers identify three primary sources to the gap between the acknowledgement of the father`s importance and the father`s actual absence – the reluctance of fathers from accessing the services, gatekeeping by mothers, and the services themselves, and mainly the attitude and position of social workers in the field.

In this paper, we wish to shed light on the importance of a fourth element – the policymaking process, and specifically the positions of policymakers towards engaging fathers in the family social services. We have focused on the views of policymakers regarding two aspects: fathers as clients and field workers` role in integrating fathers. Additionally, we asked whether the gender perceptions shape the construction of policy towards integrating fathers.

These were examined through a case study of leading bureaucrats at the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA),..

where we identify that policymakers face three main conflicts, hindering their ability and motivation to promote policy favouring father engagement. These include:

(1) Professional-gendered conflict: The `female` social worker vs the `male` client.

(2) Political conflict: Policymakers, feminists, and men.

(3) Ethical conflicts when working with fathers.

The perceptions, beliefs, and positions of policymakers have taken centre stage in the analysis of public and social policy in recent years. While this literature has traditionally focused on institutional and organisational factors in policymaking, this new trend has stressed the importance of ideas not only in shaping policy, but also in interacting with those non-ideational factors (Béland, Carstensen, & Seabrooke, 2016; Béland & Cox, 2011; Parsons, 2016). However, very little research exists on the topic of the positions of policymakers towards the engagement of fathers within the family social services.

The position of the family social services toward fathers in most western countries is based on a fundamental tension: on the one hand, it is a well-established fact that including fathers in social work professional interventions, hence attempts to help welfare clients via psychosocial therapy which includes financial aid and emotional support, is beneficial to children, families, and fathers (Featherstone, 2013); on the other hand, most interventions 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 (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & Mcmaugh, 2013; Brown et al., 2009; Baum, 2015).

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

Despite these facts, research shows that in western countries, fathers today are still outside the purview of social workers (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey & McMaugh, 2013). Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley & Dominelli (2009) point to the organisational structure of the services as one of the reasons that family social services fail to engage fathers; How the tendency to assume that gendered caring roles persist in the family encourages services to work with mothers; and how the prefernce to work with one main contact person leads to exclusion of fathers (Nygren, Walsh, Ellingsen & Christie, 2019).

The absence of fathers is consistent throughout the various field of social work. Low father engagement has been documented in the areas of parenting programs (Philip & O`Brien, 2017), children in out-of-home care (Baum & Negbi, 2013), domestic violence (Pfitzner, Humphreys, & Hegarty, 2017), substance abuse (Peled, Gavriel-Fried, & Katz, 2012).

One main difficulty that family social services experience when attempting to engage fathers stems from gender differences.

The vast majority of social workers are women. Historically, social work was originate and operated by women, since they were in charge for family supervision and maintaining the traditional bourgeoise social order, in Western countries as well as in Israel (Author, 2019). However, female workers and male clients face contradictory power relations, where the worker holds power stemming from her professional status, while the father holds power inherent in the privileged status of men in society (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar, Lawson & Hardiman, 2009).

**Fathers’s distress and image**

It was found that female professionals often misinterpret fathers` expressions of distress and fail to relate to these emotions and understand their consequences (Baum, 2015; Brown et al., 2009).

Hence, during the 1990s, attention was increasingly directed towards the absence of fathers from intervention plans (Baum,2015; Featherstone,2009). This developed into an approach that perceived men as a risk to women, and working with violent men was seen as a way to reduce this risk (East, Jackson, & O`Brien, 2006; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). However, violent parents should be assessed based on the perpetrator and not their gender.

On a parallel level, fathers began to be viewed in other servces as a resource. As the number of single-parent families grew, the absence of fathers in these families was seen as a disadvantage to their children (East, Jackson, & O`Brien, 2006; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008).

Child protection services, mainly in neo-liberal welfare states, began to harshly judge fathers` parental functioning and focus increasingly on punishing `absent` fathers, who were termed in the United States` Deadbeat Dads` (Baum, 2015; Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016; Brown et al. 2009; Featherstone, 2013; Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012). Accordingly, in the US and the UK, the social services started to operate targeted programs, meaning defined psychosocial treatment by social workers solely with fathers, in order to encourage fathers` interaction with their children, attempting to strengthen the father figure and the role of the father in the family and emphasising the father-son relationship (McCarthy, Gillies & Hooper, 2013).

The risk/resource dichotomy differs regarding the actual function of fathers, but share the functional perception of fathers. Both sides of the dichotomy view fathers through their effect on their family and 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 in general, and specifically to the social workers` focus on working with parents to promote children`s welfare (Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & Mccolgan, 2015), but is also counterproductive to engaging fathers in families. Perceiving fathers functionally, either as risks or as resources, leads to a minimal and very functional interaction between them and family social services. Instead, mothers are expected to be the interacting link to fathers, either utilising them as assets or avoiding them as risks. As Brown et al. aptly put it, “Social workers manage mothers, and in turn, mothers manage fathers” (2009, p. 30).

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

According to O`Donnell, Johnson Jr, D`Aunno, & Thornton, (2005)Most of the intervention programs set in place to improve fathers` functioning were deficient on several levels. First, they dictated that fathers take part in a particular type of parenting, such as reading to their children, and not in everyday parental tasks, such as making medical appointments. In doing so, they again preserved inequality instead of challenging it. Second, mothers were perceived in the eyes of family social services as a bridge between the family social services and the fathers. In this position, mothers were often reluctant to bring fathers into the picture, working against attempts by the services to engage fathers, sometimes even refraining from identifying the father. As a result, while family social services tried to involve fathers in parental care and as users of services, they preserved the role of the mother as the principal figure responsible for the family, both in parental tasks and regarding the father, while ignoring the power relations in society and the historical, inherent and tangible gender inequality that exists against women and mothers.

**Engaging fathers as an ideological-political conflict**

Another source of difficulty in engaging fathers is an ideological-political conflict. In the core of social work practice, there is a desire to deal with discrimination and oppression. Accordingly, in the 1980s, the feminist movement began to emphasise the unique position of women in the practice of social work (Pollack and Rossiter, 2010). This movement worked to change the patriarchal structures that oppressed women as welfare users, placing 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 & Cree, 1996). Even though men are a privileged population as opposed to women, not all men enjoy equal access to structures of gender domination, as social servicessocial workers might ignore, to some extent, issues of social status like sexuality, race, disability, and age, all of which often lead to the exclusion of many men.

Therefore, some male social services clients were marginalised by professionals based on their class, sexuality, level of competence, and ethnic or racial origin, also described as non-powerful men (Pease, 2001).

 The correction of inequality, according to some feminists (Featherstone, 2010; McCarthy, Gillies & Hooper, 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 relations. They argue that the attempts 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 fatherly roles and the increasing involvement of fathers in caring for their children. However, this discussion is not expressed in the field of social policy. The main topic of the debate concerns a change in the policy-relevant to fathers in Israel, and the focus is mainly about divorce and questions of custody and alimony payments (see, for example, as a partial sample, Mashiach Harav, Hecker and Halperin-Kaddari, 2013; Mazeh and Giron, 2015). The attitude of the Israeli welfare state towards families, following general trends in Israeli society, has been characterised by a significant rift between images and reality.

**The Israeli case**

While the State of Israel - and the Israeli welfare state - is perceived as progressing gender-wise, the reality is much bleaker. Israel is characterised by a high marriage rate, a high birth rate, a low marriage age, and a low divorce rate relative to other Western countries (Toren, 2003). The centrality of the family institution in Israel limits the range of possibilities facing women (and men). The welfare state does not work to free women, but rather to the contrary - to bind them to this institution (Berkowitz, 1999; Ajzenstadt & Gal, 2001; Helman, 2011; Herbst, 2013; Herbst & Benjamin, 2012). For example, The State of Israel declares itself to be a supporter of childbirth and families. In practice, however, this support is expressed in support of the process of bringing the child into the world - from supporting fertility treatments, through support for the difficulties that arise from pregnancy to childbirth. After birth, the conditions that the state gives to families trying to support their children are minimal, thus preserving the mother`s position as a primary care provider (Authors, in submission; Renan Barzilay, 2012; ‏Shenhav‐Goldberg, Brym & Lenton‐Brym, 2019).

The Family Welfare services in Israel areconsisted of 253 departments scattered throughout the country. The majority of practitioners are family social workers who work with families (i.e., a parent or child or both). The majority of service users are mothers and children at risk. Most welfare resources are directed at protecting children at risk, emphasising safeguarding the child and not working with the family as a whole (Sinai-Glazer & Peled, 2017).

Specifically, social policy towards fathers in Israel has been limited in scope, covering a limited range of policies, and providing modest benefits and assistance. Moreover, these benefits do not focus on promoting father engagement in the household, but rather on promoting mother engagement in the workforce (author, 2019).

While research on fathers' engagement with social services in Israel is not abundant, existing research shows a pattern similar to what is documented in other systems (and described above). Examples include patterns of workers' reluctance to engage with fathers (Baum, 2015a), the reflection of gendered perceptions of parenthood in the work of social workers (Davidson-Arad, Peled, & Leichtentritt, 2008), difficulty to identify feelings expressed by fathers (Baum & Negbi, 2013) and more. Therefore, the working assumption of this paper is that findings from the Israeli system are, to a high degree, relevant to other contexts and systems.

## Research questions

According to the academic literature described above, five main questions were examined: (a) What are the views of policymakers regarding the involvement of fathers as clients? (b) have policymakers in the Israeli social services begun to identify the importance of engaging fathers as part of providing families and children with better services? (c) What are the existing policies, and how are they implemented in the practical work of social workers in the family social services? (d) how do policymakers perceive field workers` role in integrating fathers? (e) What gender perceptions shape the construction of policy towards integrating fathers into welfare work?

## Methodology

**Method**

This study employs a qualitative model of policy research that combines a categorical analysis of interviews, seeking to understand internal structures and map the range, nature, and dynamics of the phenomena. Typologies are then identified based on the gathered information, categorising different types of attitudes, behaviours, and motivations and finding links between experiences, attitudes, circumstances, strategies, and actions, along with explicit or implicit explanations for the phenomena.

In the framework of this study, nine interviews were conducted with top bureaucrats in the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA),., most of whom are employed by the Department of Personal and Social Services (DSS), and participate in writing the guidelines relevant to the paper`s topic. We chose interviewees who are general supervisors and deputies in the field of child protection and family wealth, and one leading figure of masculinity studies at the national social work continuing education school. Additionally, all interviewers are trained social workers who worked in the social services with families. The recruiting process included mapping the leading figures who are in charge of family social services within the MOLSA and simply asking them to take part in the study. This was followed by a snowball sample design, where each interviewee was asked to provide names of others who might supply relevant data. Since 90% of the leading administrators at the Department of Personal and Social Services of the MOLSA are women, and they specifically mentioned that social work in Israel is a female dominant field, we decided to regard feminine identity as the main factor in understanding the policymakers` point of view.

The interviews were semi-structured and began with a general question regarding the policy toward fathers. This was chosen in order to allow interviewees to introduce their agendas and worldviews on engaging fathers openly and freely. Further into the interview, the interviewers tried to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific views and policies held and practised by the influential officials being interviewed. A preliminary research guide (figure 1) was assembled to ensure that several issues were addressed, even if they had not been discussed in the opening question of the interview. The research guide was modified according to the development of the research. The lengths of the interviews varied according to need but lasted for 60 minutes on average.

**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 the 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 the social work treatment of the family?

**Ethics**

The study`s detailed proposal was approved by a qualified ethical committee of the Ashkelon Academic College and authorised by the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA),.. Both committees have thoroughly discussed the project and the significance, as well as ethical dilemmas, of the research.

It was important to note the interviewees` fear of being exposed or criticised, therefore not to disclosed fully. To address this issue and to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2015), each was given the option to stay anonymous or not. Three preferred not to mention their names. With others who agreed to mentioned their names, we did not mention their specific roles in MOLSA. Interviewees who chose to reveal their names confirmed the citations in this article.

**Analysis**

Due to the limited amount of interviews, we chose a qualitative-categorical analysis, meaning identifying repetitive words, phrases, and declarations, coded into categories and themes (Connolly, 2003), we identified in the texts a typology of the main themes. Then, a reliability test compared between three researchers, all are social work scholars (two have PhD and one has MA) who are working at the same institution on this research project. Each researcher analysed the texts independently, and then several sessions of comparing the different results and discussing them took place. The agreed conclusions that were reached reflect the conflictual perspectives of policymakers about fathers as clients of social services.

## Findings

**Introduction to the findings**

Findings show that leading policy bureaucrats in the family social services of the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) hold differing views on the role of fathers and on the attitude the services should adopt toward them. Moreover, a gap between declarative commitment and practical attempts to promote the issue held a central place in the interviews:

"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 real efforts to include men are not taken or do not succeed. Accordingly, the ministry`s declared policy is gender neutral, examining the entire familial system rather than focusing on clients of a specific gender. Some practical attempts by the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) to promote the issue of integrating fathers have been implemented:

"I envision setting up a forum for experts from the field in family counselling to examine this issue"(Anonymous interview DD).

Fathers are still labelled under the category of `parenthood` or `family` and therefore, for the most part, are not considered to be a meaningful client group of the social services. All interviewees recognised men or fathers as a group that is under-treated by social workers at the social services, meaning that both the share of men who are social workers` clients is lower than the percentage of women, and that they don`t get the same `dosage` or `type` of treatment:

"The fact is, even in two-parent families, women are the more frequent clients for social services" (Anonymous interview DD).

Most interviewees placed the primary responsibility for this situation on social workers within the Departments of Personal and Social Services . Accordingly, most social workers in field practice hold preferences for working with mothers because of "a paternalistic attitude that we know everything", against a minority of social workers whose perspective comes "from a place of respect and equality with the client (treating both the mother and the father)" (Anonymous interview AA). It appears that the steps taken to promote the engagement of men are, most often, the result of private initiatives implemented by social workers practitioners and not policymakers:

"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, alongside the central role of the social workers, some interviewees revealed an understanding of the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs’ (MOLSA responsibility and influence: "It is a matter of training the employees ...This is definitely something that The 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 the budgetary barriers stemming from government policy as a main obstacle for field practitioners. The the Departments of Personal and Social Services are acting under an intensive overload of cases, struggling to gain more workforce in order to increase the attention given 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 resource available to social workers is an issue that needs to be acknowledge. It was found that mothers are prioritised because of scarce resource; as the main carer, they are the immediate focus (in the interests of the children) and absent fathers are secondary (authors, in submission).

But along these technical-srtuctural aspects, an in-depth investigation of the interviews made it possible to distinguish three themes that present fundamental conflicts in policy toward the integration of fathers into family social services.

These can be categorised into three central conflicts that arise when working with fathers:

**(1) Professional-gendered conflict: The `female` social worker vs the `father` client**

**(2) Political conflict: Policymakers, feminists and men`s organisations**

**(3) Ethical conflict: Challenges when working with fathers**

### 1. Professional-gendered conflict: The `female` social worker vs the `father` client.

The first conflict the interviewees experienced regards the tension between father clients` masculinity and the social work profession`s femininity. The fact that many social workers are women does not mean that they do not support 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 lack of knowledge and tools on how to approach and reach out men, and the negative feminine image of social workers as perceived by fathers (Authors, in submission). In the systematical context, the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs’ (MOLSA) Department of Personal and Social Services is an organisation composed of women. Therefore, some interviewees perceived the MOLSA policy towards fathers through their personal observation, 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 the opposite of femininity. They identified emotional exposure, help-seeking and therapeutic discourse with femininity, and concrete unemotional communication with masculinity, and in general precieve men as opposite to women and to social work language:

"The mere fact that a man turns to the social services is recognition or a confession of his weakness, and no man wants to be in this 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 the social services can lead to female social workers failing to understand the unique language and needs of men, and to feelings of helplessness and lack of knowledge about ways 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 contrast is socially construed 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 deters men from seeking treatment and creates the need to reach out to them, and strengthening 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 gender perception by the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs policymakers, which dichotomises men and women, leads to fundamental professional difficulties in engaging fathers.

### 2. Political changes: Policymakers, feminists and men

The ongoing gender construction of our decade was perceived by all interviewees as a progressive change that decreased gender differences and conflicts and would enable engaging fathers better:

"You never used to see men in babies` health centers, 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 dichotomous division. One interviewee claimed that

"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 interviwee 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 "see how to create the trust so that they really agree to receive any help from the system" (Anonymous interview AA).

One interviwee sought to gain this trust by challenging the gender construction of violence in which men are the ultimate aggressors and women are constant victims, and exposed 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 sectors of society, such as women. But it seems that some of the interviewees believe that the feminist struggle for equality in social work creates a certain extent 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 in the prespective of 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, understanding fathers` needs, which are expressed and demanded often nowadays by men`s organisations, creates tension and possibly even an inner dissonance among the the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA),.policymakers, who are pushed into understanding the man`s point of view:

"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, the female policymakers to shift their tendency to identify with women into also understanding men. This new understanding of masculinity has also set into action the factors which, in the eyes of the interviewees, will facilitate the issue of engaging fathers.

### 3. Ethical challenges when working with fathers

Few interviewees emphasised the importance of engaging fathers regardless of the family unit, based on a humanistic ideology which 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 the social services (as opposed to mothers, who do). social workers knowing that fathers should be included and that this results in better outcomes, but that they don't have the resource to support this, as demonsrated above. Resourcing should be taken into account for policy makers. But in addition to the practical aspect of this, 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 side, I support the rights approach towards fathers, but on the other side, the legal system in Israel does not emphasise the parents` obligation and responsibility" (Anonymous interview EE).

Here there was a split between the abovementioned tendency to advocate men and acknowledge them as subjects entitled to welfare and treatment, and the more judgmental moralistic social work approach which expected the client to take full responsibility, specifically perceiving fathers as a function of the family for the child`s sake. In other words – the discourse of rights against the discourse of obligations:

"There are some approaches which criticise the father who chooses not to be 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).

Nevertheless, while this Interviwee also acknowledged that the more dominant discourse in Israel is the rights discourse, there is a tension between the two approaches among social workers. This aspect is also related to the manner in which the law relates to 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 the attitude 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), and also "fear of the intimidating man that paralyses us and that we need to work on" (Anonymous interview FF).

Nevertheless, their identity as social workers is also helpful in this conflict, since it encourages an empathic attitude towards the image of aggressive masculine behaviour and some interviewees recognise that sometimes violence is a problematic form of expressing frustration:

“Some of this violent behaviour towards social workers derives from these divorced fathers who need to be recognised” (Anonymous interview GG).

However, there is 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 ).

## Discussion

The pattern that emerges from this bottom-up qualitative research of policymakers` attitudes is that of conflict and contradiction. The three conflicts portrayed above place the interviewees in a very unsettled and unclear territory, in which they often encounter difficulties paving a path. The three conflicts reported by interviewees all duplicate, correspond, or echo conflicts and dilemmas reported in previous research.

The professional-gendered conflict reflects the conflicts reported in previous research most directly. Interviewees related to the difficulty of social work, as a female profession, to relate to father clients, both because of gender differences and because of lack of knowledge on working with men. This conflict reverberates the tensions between female workers and father clients, as described by Bundy-Fazioli, Briar, Lawson & Hardiman (2009), Baum (2015), and others.

It can be seen, then, that the professional-gendered, originating in the field level, replicates on the level of the top bureaucracy. It does so in two distinct ways. First, the interviewees – all social workers and most women – experience the gendered-professional conflict first hand. In addition to experiencing this conflict themselves, interviewees also report witnessing the conflict and its outcomes in the field, as an obstacle preventing workers in the services they are in charge of from effectively engaging fathers.

The political conflict, placing policymakers in the line of fire between feminist organisations and men's rights groups, represents a different pattern. Here, policymakers do not experience a conflict originating in the level of field workers.

The ethical-professional conflict reflects conflicts reported in existing literature, in yet another route. The tension between allocating resources to engaging what interviewees defined as `hard-to-reach fathers,’ versus allocating these resources to mothers who could greatly benefit from them, has been theoretically described in previous literature, not as a conflict experienced by workers in the field but rather as a conflict that theorist such as Featherstone (2010) and McCarthy, Gillies & Hooper (2013) identify.

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

We have shown that leading bureaucrats in the MOLSA, and specifically in its Department of Personal and Social Services, are becoming aware of the importance of engaging fathers on the one hand. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that there is still a lot to be done to promote the engagement of fathers as a separate and under-treated client group. All interviewees emphasised in one way or another the insufficiency of what has been done to include fathers. Additionally, it is evident that policymakers have taken no explicit action towards specifically training or supervising social workers on this matter.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the position of policymakers towards engaging fathers in the family social services in Israel. These policymakers acknowledge the importance of father engagement and are aware of its significance but fail to employ the power they hold to promote programs 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 policymaking arena. Moreover, this failure emphasises the interviewees` lack of professional agency. These interviewees work in an overburdened and conflicted system that doesn`t empower them with the agency they need to inspire and drive the desirable change towards engaging fathers. Additionally, traditional and conservative perceptions in Israel of family gender roles seems to have an impact on the disengagement of fathers.

The implications of this study are varied. As can be surmised from our results, policymakers` professional and personal views have a significant role in engaging fathers as clients of the family social services. These views are varied and sometimes contradictive and are worthy of further examination. Our results also emphasise the influence and significance of the policymakers` female identity on this matter. This identity must be considered when looking at the actors in the field of welfare policy. These conclusions notwithstanding, our findings proved that along with the complexity of the issue, policymakers do believe that fathers are a significant client group that should be better treated and that social work schools and the policymakers themselves should provide field workers with the appropriate tools, orientation and tailored supervision required to work with this population.

Finally, we wish to note that this study is limited, as it relied only on several actors in the field of welfare policy. Future studies would do well to examine other administrators, and to compare the attitudes of male and female policymakers, as well as to interview social workers as we did in our recent study (Authors, in submission). Additionally, the field of divorce disputes, not directly related to family social services in Israel, should be further investigated with regards to child welafre. The centrality of divorce disputes as a central field pertinent to fathers and the concept of this field as a `battelfield` have been documented in the literature (Mashiach Harav, Hecker, and Halperin-Kaddari, 2013; Mazeh and Giron, 2015) and should be further explored. Also, further analysis could have been done by other researchers, thus strengthening the reliability test. Moreover, relying on interviews with policymakers may obscure processes on the field level, either because policymakers are not aware of them or because they wish to paint a bright picture of the services. Additionally, to understand the broad context of policy formation regarding fathers and family social services, studies should examine the legislation process - past, present, and future - that concerns the issue at hand.

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