

“The least important person in the room”: Father involvement as a critical factor in gender equality

Jessica Pratezina

Abstract

In the decades since Hochschild and Machung (2012) first conceived of “the second shift”, the unequal distribution of care work among mother-father co-parents has been a topic of great concern to scholars, advocates, and mothers themselves. Despite slow progress towards greater equality, mothers still take on most of the housework, childcare, kin-keeping, household management, and mental/emotional labour. This imbalance has far-reaching consequences that impact women’s wellness, financial stability, career aspirations and achievements, and relationship satisfaction. Yet, increased father involvement in the home is not promoted as a factor in gender equality and few policies, programs, or practitioners advocate for the redistribution of care-work as a means to mitigate the burden placed on mothers. Even in the discourse and practice of child and youth care professionals, this unequal distribution of care is most often construed as an individual relationship issue instead of a complex social problem linked to gendered norms and expectations around being a “good mother” or “good father”, as well as to a host of other societal conditions such as workplace policies that effectively sustain the status quo. Mothers are often positioned as the presumptive, “natural”, default parents, while failure to highlight the important roles that fathers can and often want to play reinforces gender inequality. Child and

youth care practitioners can be strong advocates for women's equality by interrogating their own practice and considering the ways that mother-centrism reifies rather than reduces gender inequality in parenting relationships and beyond.

Keywords

father involvement, gender equality, family formation, child and youth care practice

As I write this, I am two weeks out from the birth of my first child. I entered my doctoral program with the intention of studying father involvement as a factor in gender equality. Three days after receiving my acceptance letter I learned I was pregnant, meaning my husband and I would be taking participant observation to the next level. Because the pregnancy took place during the COVID-19 lockdown, it was a rather isolating experience. There was no opportunity for my husband to accompany me to any doctor's appointments or ultrasounds. Once during a brief reprieve in the Toronto lockdown we were able to walk into a baby shop together. This was as close as we got to interacting with other expectant couples or speaking together with "professionals" (i.e. the shopkeeper who sold us the stroller). At the same time, work-from-home policies meant that the two of us were together in our tiny apartment for nearly every hour of the day. When I was at my sickest and most miserable, the only one who could care for me was my husband who was privy to every bout of nausea, every night of interminable insomnia, and every tear of frustrated suffering. Despite his exclusion from the medical appointments, I do not know how he could have been a more involved and invested father.

After our baby was born a stream of nurses and doctors attended to us in the hospital, completing all the requisite checks and procedures. One particularly friendly and experienced nurse sat chatting with me as she pricked my tiny new baby's heels for routine newborn screening while my husband closed his eyes across the room for a few moments of much-earned sleep (if you can call it that).

“And when you get home,” the nurse continued, “Make sure you don’t wear yourself out looking after your other son.”

“Oh, I don’t have any other children,” I said.

“No, I mean...” she motioned her head to my husband.

“Ah,” I replied. I understood what she was implying.

Indeed, she was not wrong to make this assumption. It does not take an academic to know that, in much of the Euro-Western world, women in mother-father partnerships end up taking on most of the care-work, particularly when a new baby enters the family. In Canada, this amounts to about 1.5 times more unpaid housework and childcare/eldercare hours than men (Gender and Economy, 2021). Not only are men exempt from the expectation that they will contribute to the routine care work in the family, but they are also regularly positioned in popular as well as professional discourse as child-like and, essentially, incompetent when it comes to these tasks, with some going so far as to suggest that women are essentially (or biologically) more suited to household work. What the friendly nurse was alerting me to was simply the reality that occurs for most new mother-father couples; instead of finding a co-parent in the baby’s father, the mother finds she is now expected, both socially and relationally, to be responsible for the care and feeding of both.

Not long after the birth, my husband and I took the baby to the pediatrician. The doctor introduced himself by acknowledging the baby and then me before proceeding with the appointment.

“And the baby’s father, Daniel,” I interjected.

“Well, yes,” said the doctor, then jokingly added, to my husband, “You’re the least important person in the room!”

These are two small examples of how fathers are positioned in professional discourse and practice as both incompetent as well as unnecessary parents. Even when they show up, they are remarkably invisible to the professionals they interact with. This mother-centrism, the spoken and unspoken understanding that the mother is the natural, default, parent, is reinforced across medical and social service practices as well as popular media and advertising. Consequently, mothers are expected to take ultimate

responsibility for their children, overburdening women in mother-father partnerships, excluding fathers from the social supports they need to give them confidence and competence as parents, while, at the same time, exempting them from the routine responsibilities of parenthood.

Interventions aimed at increasing gender equality are typically targeted towards supporting and encouraging mothers to continue in their unpaid care work obligations rather than expecting fathers to increase involvement and shoulder an equal share of these tasks. Under the pretext of supporting women, the exclusion of fathers from social supports and programs aimed at parents and families reifies gender norms and reinscribes women as the primary parents. I argue that policies that promote women in parental roles while exempting fathers allow women to continue to provide unpaid care-work at the expense of their own personal aspirations, wellness, preferences, and financial stability. Consider the example of my friend, Sue. When her baby was having difficulty maintaining his weight, a dietician needed to become involved. Sue asked that the dietician contact her partner, the baby's father, who was the one responsible for food and cooking in their house. Despite this request the professional continued to make appointments only with Sue and made no attempt to involve the baby's father.

Across social service fields, gender equality in the home is seen as a relationship issue rather than a social issue, best tackled in the therapist's office rather than through appropriate public and social policies. Underlying this construction is often the assumption that mothers are naturally or essentially better suited to care-work and, therefore, the default parents. Unfortunately, we as child and youth care professionals contribute to this continued inequality in our professional practice by reinforcing social norms that place responsibility on mothers while failing to call on fathers as equal co-parents. Changing these practices and perceptions requires a new kind of advocacy work that holds up fathers as capable and responsible and promotes inclusion by refusing to exempt fathers from their parental roles.

The second shift continues

Struggles with gender equality in co-parenting relationships are unique to mother-father couples. Multiple theories from different perspectives have been put forward to explain why women in heterosexual relationships continue to experience problems with gender equality despite a great deal of interest and concern in the topic. The wage gap between opposite-gender couples becomes even more severe when children are introduced (American Association of University Women, 2018). Parenting has an unequal impact on women in mother-father couples that is not seen with their lesbian counterparts who, without long-established gender norms to guide them, are able to divide up household and childcare tasks in a more equitable way (Rosenbaum, 2019). In what has been dubbed the “motherhood penalty,” employers are less likely to hire mothers, tend to view mothers as less competent workers, and pay mothers 71% as much as fathers in the same role (American Association of University Women, 2018). At the same time, many fathers in heterosexual relationships experience a “fatherhood bonus,” receiving higher wages than men without children and being perceived as more reliable and responsible workers (Fuller & Cook, 2018). At least in part, this is because women are expected to continue to be the primary caretakers and household managers in addition to their paid employment, a social expectation that heterosexual men do not experience.

Hochschild and Machung (2012) first conceptualized ‘The Second Shift’ over thirty years ago, describing the unequal burden of domestic labour presumed to be women’s responsibility even when women work a ‘first shift’ outside the home. Gender inequality in the distribution of domestic labour within mother-father families with children has persisted with little statistically significant change, resulting in what has been called a stalled gender revolution (Bianchi et al., 2012; Geist & Ruppner, 2018, Houle et al., 2015; Kamp Dush et al., 2107; Moyser & Burlock, 2018; Parker & Wang, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2015).

There are now several decades worth of studies suggesting that father involvement can have positive outcomes on children’s development. Yet, one of the most under-acknowledged impacts of father involvement is on the well-being of mothers. Fathers who

are positively involved provide a host of benefits to mothers not only to reduce their burden of domestic tasks but also to their mental health, well-being, and life satisfaction (Giurgescu & Templin, 2015; Mallette et al., 2015; McClain & Brown, 2016). Because they are often balancing childcare, household management, careers outside the home and, often, elder care, mothers in co-parenting relationships are frequently frustrated, resentful, and disillusioned with co-parenting (Perry et al., 2015). Studies find that mothers and fathers often agree that positive father involvement is important and is expressed in part through love and financial support. However, mothers also prioritize direct care tasks (feeding, hygiene, clothing, homework help) while fathers prioritize their roles as disciplinarian, protector, and playmate (Perry et al., 2015; Rushing & Powell, 2015).

Despite findings that point to unequal division of direct care tasks as a contributor to mothers' decreased health and wellness and to family conflict and dissolution, there has been little public investment in supporting father's roles (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). Father involvement has not been conceived as a means to reduce the burden on mothers or to support mothers' health or career progression; in other words, as a means to achieve greater gender equality in the home and women's sustained and successful advancement towards their own career, professional, and educational goals.

A relationship issue or a social issue?

When a couple is faced with challenges around division of household and care work, the difficulty is most often understood to be a problem in the relationship. Little attention is paid to the social forces that exempt fathers from participating in routine household responsibilities, including the policies and practices of social service professionals. For example, I have watched as women are told that if they are overwhelmed by household responsibilities and find that their male partners are not taking initiative and participating equally, they are ultimately to blame for the problem. They have been picking up his slack, not demanding enough of him, and not letting him experience the consequences of his negligent behaviour. Women, it would seem, have enabled men, allowing them to shrug off their obligations. Women should go on strike, or create chore charts, or withhold

sex until a more equitable balance can be found. Once more, at the end of the day, the problem is her responsibility to solve.

Less time is spent considering how gendered expectations around care work operate at a social level, and how these expectations infiltrate and inform relationship expectations. Due to this, little investment is made in promoting father involvement at the level of policy and practice. In the Canadian context, Quebec and Ontario are the only provinces with dedicated funding to support father involvement and, in Ontario, this funding amounts to only \$55,000 a year provided to DadCentral, barely enough for a part time staff member.

Most fathers deeply value their role and want to be invested, involved co-parents. Yet there is little in our society designed to help them to do just that. Despite going into parenthood with every good intention, many men struggle with the gap between the kind of parent they hope to be and the kind of parent they are supported to be. This gap is created in no small part by a veritable tsunami of social forces that act to portray fathers as less capable, sometimes even dangerous caregivers. This includes popular media that perpetuates the deadbeat or incompetent dad trope as well as advertising that aims general baby or childcare products exclusively at mothers and parenting or prenatal programs that claim to be for “parents” but really only involve mothers. In my own experience exploring baby care programs to participate in with my husband in preparation for our child, I found that programs are almost always aimed at mothers, though a handful did offer something like a “dad’s corner” with the information “every dad” seems to want to know, which often includes “when can we have sex again?” and the promise that if he is attentive and helps with the housework, it will be sooner rather than later. Both my husband and I found the baby preparation materials aimed at dads to be demeaning and dismissive.

Most parents-to-be have not been supported to sit down and have a conversation about what equality in their parenting relationship might look like. Typically, couples are left to sort out gender equality on their own with little acknowledgement of the social forces at work in establishing and informing these relationship expectations. I recently developed a proposal for a post-natal parenting program. In my survey of available baby

care programs available to Canadian parents, I have not been able to find a single baby care or parenting program or course in Canada that acknowledges gender equality as a critical issue in parenting relationships and one that is particularly important for women's wellbeing. Moms parent; dads help. If this is the norm in relationships, it is one that has been socially created and reinforced at every turn.

Mothers as the natural, default parent

While it may appear that policies and programs that primarily include women are helpful in promoting equality, in the end they collude with gender oppression by reinforcing the idea that mothers bear ultimate responsibility for house and home. Hidden in much of this dialogue is a kind of gender essentialism; the belief that gender is defined by deep, non-obvious and essential properties that make men and women who they are (Prentice & Miller, 2006; Skewes, Fine & Hasalm, 2018). Essentialist notions become especially apparent when considering parenting norms. It is presumed that women are, for example, more adept multitaskers which gives them the ability to juggle multiple household tasks at once (Conner et al., 2013). Women are said to have higher emotional intelligence (Korn Ferry, 2016). Men are portrayed as "fixers" while women are more natural "nurturers" (Denholm, 2012). These claims may be more difficult to understand as oppressive because, on the surface, they seem to be compliments. After all, they are acknowledging women as superior to men in these skills. However, claims like this also collude with gender oppression by portraying women as essentially good at and best suited to the unpaid caregiving roles to which they have so long been confined.

Mother centrism as veiled sexism in child and youth care practice

Expecting mothers to be the primary parents while at the same time excluding and exempting fathers from household and caregiving responsibilities is a practice that ultimately enables the neo-liberal project. Rather than acknowledging care work as work and providing mothers with the safeguards they are entitled to as workers, these practices instead promote women's continued free labour without any such protections, leaving women overworked, unacknowledged, and vulnerable. Yet in all the talk about

promoting gender equality in Canada, the idea that fathers should step up and participate in routine care work is continually overlooked. Canadian society is content to support mothers in their unpaid labour, particularly if it allows men to corner the job market.

Child and youth care workers are not immune to the sexist forces at work here and I am not an exception. When I worked as a home visitor, I only rarely encountered fathers and, in fact, I almost never asked about fathers at all. Files were labelled with the name of the mother and it was assumed that if there was a father in the family, he was absent or, ultimately, unimportant. Only on one occasion did I encounter a single father within my caseload. I was told that, for my own safety, I would need to find another worker to go with me to visit the family. Scheduling two over-worked professionals to go to a single visit was not a practical requirement and, I am ashamed to say, that father never received a visit. Eventually, circumstances changed, the mother re-entered the picture, and the family was able to access services. That providing service to a father-led household was such a challenge speaks volumes to the way that fathers and their roles are understood in our practice.

Mother centrism is not an indicator of a society that is moving towards greater gender equality or that we are so deeply concerned with the plight of women. Instead, it manifests the dominant understanding that the primary caretaker should be a woman and, if it is not, we are at a loss about how to proceed. What is sometimes called “mother’s privilege” is precisely the opposite; it is a form of continued oppression sold as “support” for women. Nowhere is the burden of “mother privilege” more apparent than in social responses to absent parents. If a father leaves, he will never receive a call from a social worker, he will only occasionally be held to account in the form of child support, and the likely reaction will be a mixture of pity and inevitability. It is not a privilege to be put or kept in a position where one is told that the brunt of childcare is ultimately the woman’s responsibility while, at the same time, fathers are understood to be essentially less capable caregivers who can be given a pass on these responsibilities.

Conclusion

When policies and programs claiming to service families target only mothers, implicit in this is the understanding that children and households are, ultimately, a mother's responsibility. Child and youth care practice that views fathers as co-parents and not as "mother's helpers" and that holds men accountable as involved caregivers is needed to address this gap. This is not an issue of "father's rights," this is an issue of women's wellbeing. While much has been written about the academic, developmental, and social benefits children and youth experience when there is a positively involved father, less attention has been paid to the way a father committed to gender equality might influence their children. How might this modelling from fathers move women's equality forward in future generations? For helping professionals across sectors, this means rethinking father involvement as a critical factor in gender equality. Central to this is interrogating the way that fathers are both exempted as well as excluded in child and youth care practice. Child and youth care professionals can begin working towards shifting this by using father inclusive language, producing content that shows competent and involved fathers and advocating for funding for father-specific programming. By expecting and supporting fathers to be fully involved and equal partners in childcare and home life, we can begin to relieve women of the expectation that the task of raising children is theirs alone. In addition, most fathers in mother-father partnerships want to be active, useful, responsible, and confident parents. To do this, they need to be given not only the opportunity to fully participate as equal parents, but the supports and encouragement to do so well.

When asked, I am sure most couples would respond that fairness and equality in their relationship is important to them. Yet parents, especially new parents, receive little guidance about how to navigate gender equality in their parenting. Child and youth care workers can help parents live into these values by calling on fathers to be the engaged and competent parents that they so often hope to be. This means intentionally seeking out and including fathers while at the same time giving mothers the chance, even the permission, to step back and prioritize their own needs, desires, and preferences. This is the kind of son I hope to raise; one who sees equality as a part of his responsibility not

only in his relationships, but in the society he participates in. One of the gifts I hope to give him is the experience of parents who, albeit imperfectly, made the value of equality a priority.

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Jessica Pratezina

is a PhD student in Interdisciplinary Studies (Child and Youth Care; Sociology) at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Her PhD project is a study of gender equality, father involvement, and early family formation. She is also one of the few academics globally who specializes in children in cults/new religious movements. She has over a decade of experience as a front-line child and youth care practitioner working with vulnerable families.

Author Note

I thank Dr. Jessica Ball for her review and feedback. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jessica Pratezina, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Victoria. Email: pratezina@gmail.com