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**What about the fathers? The presence and absence of the father in social work practice in England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden - a comparative study**


## Abstract

Within northern Europe, gendered roles and responsibilities within the family have been challenged through an emergence of different family forms, increasing cultural diversity, and through progressive developments in welfare policies. To varying degrees, welfare policies in different EU countries support a dual-earner model and encourage men to be more active as fathers by reinforcing statutory rights and responsibilities. In child welfare practice, there has traditionally been a strong emphasis on women as mothers being primary carers for the children, while fathers are less active or absence carers. This paper explores, in four national welfare contexts, how child welfare social workers include fathers in practice decisions. Data was collected using focus group interviews with social workers from England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. Similarities and differences emerge in relation to services and the focus of social work assessments. However, overall, the research suggests that despite gains in policy and legislation that promote gender equality, fathers remain largely absent in child welfare practice decisions about the parenting of their children. From the research, we raise questions for social work practice and the development of welfare policies.



**KEYWORDS**

family policy, welfare regime, child welfare, fathers, comparative research

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In northern European countries, there has been a shift in the culture and practice of fatherhood grounded in a movement towards gender equality, the growth of new family forms, and increased labour force participation among women (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Featherstone, 2004; SOU, 2014:6; Storhaug & Øien, 2012). Family policies have a greater emphasis on gender equality, and fathers are expected to be more involved in the caring of children and have improved statutory rights and responsibilities (Hantrais, 2004). Moreover, developments in areas, such as, attachment theory, that previously tended to focus solely on the mother-child relationship, have strengthened the importance of the father as largely influential in his child's life (Lewis & Lamb, 2007). Despite this, full gender equality has not been achieved; fatherhood and fathering remains largely a 'choice' for men, whereas being a mother and caring for children remains a central assumption in women's lives.

Child welfare work aims to ensure good living conditions for children and intervenes in family life when deemed necessary. Policy regulating child protection work increasingly promotes the inclusion of fathers in the lives of their children (HSE, 2011; NOU, 2012:05; Socialstyrelsen, 2004). Social workers should, in their everyday decisions about the adequacy of parenting, reflect on and challenge dominant gendered norms within the family and also recognise that fathers are a resource and that not involving fathers might increase risks for children (Storhaug, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2013). Previous research shows, however, that child welfare services (CWS) continue to be primarily mother-focused, and social workers fail to involve fathers in their work (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Scourfield et al., 2012; Socialstyrelsen, 2004; Storhaug, 2013; Strega et al., 2009). Also, fathers are likely to be seen in a negative light and as potential risks or threat to the children and/or the mother (Storhaug, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2013).

Decision-making processes at a social work practice level are highly dependent on the societal context in which they operate (Hearn et al., 2004; Hämäläinen et al., 2012). For example, Scandinavian countries are widely credited with having progressive policy and legislation that promotes gender equality, whilst England and Ireland are identified as being more tentative in their adoption of such policy (Hantrais, 2004; ILO, 2005; Kuronen, 2010). This article explores how child welfare social workers include fathers in practice decisions, through the lens of there being nuanced differences in key policy and statutes in England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. By doing so, we identify the differences and continuities that exist at the intersection of practice and policy. Overall, we argue that, despite policy and legislative differences, the role of fathers, continue to be marginalised in practice decisions in all four countries. Fathers are, nevertheless, excluded for multiple reasons; here, we interrogate additional complexities such as when the father is a potential perpetrator of abuse, or a migrant, and how this intersects with assumptions about gendered caring roles.

# 2 SOCIAL POLICY CONTEXT

## 2.1 Welfare state regimes

Esping-Anderson's (1990) influential typology of welfare state regimes, which describes how welfare states to different degrees emancipate individuals from market dependency, has been described as 'gender-blind' (Bambra, 2007). For example, Sainsbury (1999) argues that welfare states play an important role in promoting gender equality and can reduce women's economic dependence on men by providing them with opportunities to participate in the labour market. Also, Hantrais (2004) is concerned with the ways in which welfare states balance family responsibility and state intervention, including which family members are responsible for care – men or women. Within this framework, Sweden and Norway are described as 'de-familialised'; family policy aims to minimise the individuals' reliance on their families by offering a broad range of family welfare services and child welfare systems characterised by a preventing orientation (Blomberg et al., 2010; Hantrais, 2004; Kuronen, 2010; Lorenz, 1994). England and Ireland are considered 'partly de-familialised'. Although policy is rhetorically supportive of family, there is reluctance to intervene in private life and child welfare maintains a risk-oriented approach (Dukelow & Considine, 2017; Hantrais, 2004). We also draw on Kammer et al.'s (2012) typology, where distinct clusters of welfare states are identified in relation to redistribution. Sweden and Norway are typically located within a 'social democratic' cluster, whereby gender equality is actively promoted in child-rearing and access to the workplace. Ireland and the countries of the UK are located within a 'liberal' cluster, where welfare policies tend to be residual and, by contrast, when fathers are supported, it is only those identified as 'vulnerable' and/or caring for children who are seen as vulnerable.

Linked to this, comparative research on child welfare systems has previously made a distinction between a child protection model and a family service model, placing England and Ireland in the former and Sweden and Norway in the latter (Gilbert et al., 2011). Following an increased focus, across many countries, in promoting child development and children's rights in relation to the state, Gilbert (2012) also suggests an additional model - a child focused model.

## 2.2 Family and child welfare policy in England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden

Legislative conceptualisations of 'fathers' and national policies related to paternity leave are key indicators of how a state perceives fathers/fathering/fatherhood. The former shows whom the state recognises, and expects to take responsibility, as a parent with rights and

responsibilities. The latter is indicative of the state's commitment to encouraging and enabling a father to care for his children.

In all four countries, when a child is born to a married couple, a man automatically has legal paternal rights and responsibilities. When parents are not married, the ways in which paternity is defined vary across contexts; however, there is statutory recognition that unmarried fathers have both responsibilities and legally protected rights in all countries. In England, Sweden and Norway, this is not dependent on current or historical co-residence (1949; Gov.uk, 2017; NAV, 2017a). By contrast, in Ireland, a more traditional construct of paternity persists; only fathers that have resided with the mother and the child have statutory rights, and/or responsibilities (MacMahon, 2015).

Moreover, Norway and Sweden offer comparatively generous systems of paternity leave and policy is progressive; since the 1970s, an insurance-based provision of parental leave has promoted opportunities for men to care for their children (Bergman & Hobson, 2002; ILO, 2005). Both countries have a maternal and paternal quota (10 weeks in Norway and 13 weeks in Sweden for each parent) as well as lengthy periods of shared parental leave, during which parents are paid 80-100% of their salary (NAV, 2017b; Prop 2014/15:124).

By contrast, in Ireland and England paternity leave policies were introduced comparatively recently, are less supportive of parents sharing the care of children, and are less generous financially. Since 2002, in England, men are entitled to two weeks' paid leave (£140.98 a week) at the birth or adoption of their child. Entitlement to 'shared parental leave' was also introduced in 2015, which allows parents to share a leave period of 52 weeks when their child is born (40 weeks paid at £140.98 and 12 weeks unpaid) (Gov.Uk, 2017b). In Ireland, it is only since 2016 that fathers have been entitled to two weeks *unpaid* leave, at their child's birth or adoption (Paternity Leave and Benefit Act, 2016). In recent years, Ireland has implemented important changes related to the status of fathers. These are, however, limited and continue to reflect more traditional gender roles and co-resident family constructs.

## 3 INCLUSION OF FATHERS IN SOCIAL WORK

Including fathers in their children's parenting is recognised as important in social work with families, and it is argued that this can result in better outcomes for children and families (Storhaug, 2013). In the countries examined here, policy documents emphasise the need to involve fathers in CWS. Previous literature suggests that CWS workers continue to focus on the mother in their work, and fathers are infrequently involved (Baum, 2017; Osborn, 2014; Scourfield, 2003; Scourfield et al., 2012; Storhaug, 2013). Various explanations for this are offered. Zanoni et al. (2013) argue that social workers can express resistance to father-inclusive practice, and others argue that mothers are deemed as the default client (Brewsaugh

& Strozier, 2016; O'Donnell et al., 2005). Osborne (2014) notes that the vast majority of child protection work takes place with lone mothers, and CWS workers assume they are working with one-parent families. Consequently, it is common to find a lack of, or incomplete, contact details for fathers, making it difficult to involve and/or trace fathers. In reality however, non-custodial fathers, despite being largely overlooked or dismissed by CWS workers, *are* often engaged in their children's lives (Bellamy, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2012); they are 'involved fathers' (Dermott, 2014).

Research also suggests that fathers are frequently viewed in a negative light by social workers. Scourfield (2003), for example, identified different 'father discourses' among social workers; while there are occasions where fathers are seen to have equal importance to others in child welfare cases, they are more commonly seen as irrelevant, absent, or as a threat to the child, the mother or the social worker. Perceiving fathers as a risk, rather than a resource, has dominated previous research (Zanoni et al., 2013) and men's bodies can be seen as 'risky' in relation to general child care (Doucet, 2006). Fathers as potential risks has been further problematized with narratives on migrant fathers with different ethnicities/cultural backgrounds (Gupta & Featherstone, 2016). Existing literature does, however, recognise that some fathers – for example those that are violent – *are* a risk, and services *should* manage contact with both mother and children appropriately (Erikksen & Hester, 2001). It is also argued that excluding violent fathers entirely from their children's lives is counter-productive; it does not respond to the needs of the children, or support these men to develop non-violent parenting and partnering relationship patterns (Featherstone, 2014; Featherstone & Packover, 2007). In this paper, we compare whether, and to what extent, the scholarly arguments presented prevail in child welfare decision-making processes across four different countries

## 4 METHODS

The data presented was collected during 2016 in Norway, Sweden, Ireland and England, as part of the broader NORFACE, Welfare State Future, Family Complexity and Social Work (FACSK) study. This study aimed to compare family based social work in different welfare regimes and conducted focus groups with social workers in each country. The combined vignette and focus group approach, allowed researchers to examine: processes of contemporary and collective sense-making; how case reasoning was defended and negotiated; and when and how some themes were silenced or ignored (Hall & Slembrouck, 2010; Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). At the outset of the study, a standardised case vignette - an imagined case – and standardised prompt questions were developed by an international team of researchers. The aim of the vignette was to prompt focus groups discussion by presenting participants with a complex but sufficiently credible case. Using a standardised vignette and

standardised questions, developed by researchers from across the participating countries, ensured the scenario was recognisable to social workers in all countries, whilst increasing coherency across countries, but still allowing for variations (Nygren & Oltedal, 2015).

**Synopsis of case vignette**

Maria and David live with their three children, Beth (5), John (8) and Thomas (20, has a different, estranged father). Maria is unemployed and has a history of addiction. David is a migrant and has no birth relatives living in his new host country. Maria and David often argue. Sometimes, Maria and the children have stayed with Maria's brother Paul and wife.

Stage 1 is a telephone call from Maria to the social worker. Maria is distressed and describes difficulties she is experiencing, which include: arguments with David; Thomas' mental health problems; and David's migration status being complex. She also refers to David condoning 'beatings', but it is intentionally unclear whether he is beating Maria and/or the children.

Stage 2 is a telephone call between a social worker and a mental health worker, who expresses concerns about Maria's progress in relation to her mental health and drug/alcohol use, although she has been in rehab. The mental health worker is worried about David's 'negative influences' on the family, including his mental health, the legitimacy of his employment, and the complexity of his status in the country. She alludes to the relationship difficulties between David and Maria which have resulted in Maria and her youngest children living with Maria's brother's family on a number of occasions.

Stage 3 is presented as a social worker talking to colleagues about the case. Beth and John have been living with Maria's brother's family for 12 months. Maria has completed rehab, but she and David have separated. David's mother has recently died and he wants to take the children to see his birth family, who live in his country of origin. Concern is also expressed about the children's behaviour in school, and that Maria has attended Beth and John's school drunk.

We aimed for diverse focus groups; thus, research sites were selected to represent a range of organisational settings (e.g. governmental organisations and NGOs). Social workers were approached after initial contact with the manager in each organisation. All participant social workers had a university degree in social work and worked at different stages of the child welfare process (e.g. new referral, investigation, treatment). The data presented here draws on thirteen focus groups, each approximately two hours in length, conducted with between five and eight child welfare social workers. Focus groups were held in four countries, representing two comparative welfare state contexts: Norway (2) and Sweden (1) (de-familialised'), and the Republic of Ireland (2) and England (8) ('partly familialised').

Our data were analysed inductively; systematic coding processes were applied, resulting in themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Whilst the corpus of data generated in each country varies in volume, methodologically, it was essential to examine data gathered in all relevant focus groups. Subsequently, where similarities were identified across settings, conclusions drawn were tenable, whilst those identifying difference are necessarily more tentative. Also, although the vignette approach has been shown to lessen the influence of social desirability (Wilks, 2004), we are aware that some answers may differ from real practice. Further, it is important to consider that the details of the vignette - the mother making the initial contact with the social worker and the suggestion of abusive behaviour - may contribute to this focus on the mother as a carer for their children, rather than the father. Despite these complexities, the methods employed did achieve their intended aims.

Standard ethical procedures were followed: researchers gained written informed consent; and data was securely stored and anonymised. Approval from an ethical review board was not required in Norway and Sweden; however, in England and Ireland, such approval was sought and secured.

# 5 RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the focus groups revealed two dominant themes relevant to the focus of this paper: a) The parent positioned as most responsible for the care of children b) The father as a risk.

## 5.1 The parent positioned as most responsible for the care of children

### 5.1.1 *The exclusion of the father as the primary caregiver*

In all four countries, social workers position the mother as primary caregiver for family children, and consequently exclude the father. Instead, the well-being of the mother and the two youngest children in the family is central in discussions during the first stage of the vignette. In Ireland, for example, participants note that their initial action would be *"[…] contacting mum for, if she's presenting like that. She would be asked to seek medical attention for herself."* (Ireland). More explicitly, in Norway social workers state:

> *We need to make an... [assessment]... yes, what's the situation now, check out the children, but preferably make a plan for what one should do next. Does the mother need someone to take care of her health, do the children know… how are the children doing?* (Norway)

Concern is subsequently expressed about the mother's capabilities to take care of her children due to her alcohol abuse; however, the father is still not considered as a possible carer. In both England and Sweden, the mother is the main focus of suggested interventions.

> *Yes, it seems like a… an investigator needs to look at the mother's parenting capacity and the children's safety as things are and… make contact with the children's preschool, school… the brother… this Paul and his wife maybe? (Sweden)*

> *There's then the opportunity to assess mum's parenting abilities too - she's separated with dad - to determine whether she is able to actually do it on her own. If she is it's about supporting that to happen, so ultimately they can live with mum and she can parent them effectively.* (England)

This continued tendency to position the mother as the main carer is acknowledged in the Irish data:

> *I've just realised I've been doing it all the time here, assuming that mum has a major role in relation to the protection of the children and the care of the children and that we, and we haven't considered dad. Dad has an equal role and an equal responsibility and, we're assuming that. They're both equal, have equal responsibility for the children and should take an equal role in regard to the protection of those children.* (Ireland)

Despite making this observation, the Irish social workers do, nevertheless return to focusing on the mother and her children, and the father is given little further consideration. In all four countries, the father's role as a caregiver is, therefore, overlooked.

### 5.1.2 *Recognising that the father should be included*

Whilst focus on the mother's parenting and well-being dominate the discussion in all countries, the father *is* considered, albeit in limited ways and to varying degrees, in each country. Social workers from Ireland, Norway and England express a general awareness of the importance of involving the father in a child welfare case. In Ireland, as shown in the previous quotation, this is expressed as a matter of gender equality. In Norway this may be a response to social workers being criticised for not sufficiently involving fathers, particularly those who do not live with their children:

*- We have of course experienced some setbacks when we have not been good enough at including fathers.*
*- You're thinking of those, who don't live in the home? But this one does live in the home!*
*- We have to do better, that is for sure.* (Norway)

Furthermore, social workers in England, Sweden and Norway identify the need to gather information on and to speak to the father. The reason for ascertaining the father's view is not about assessing his parenting, but about understanding his perspective on the family's problems, to avoid assessments being biased towards the mother. This is suggested in the dialogue below, between social workers in Norway:

*- But so far, no one has spoken to the father, and I also think that, just to be a bit contrary [to the previous discussion], or like, we don't have any direct statements from the father in what we have read now…*
**-** *And that is of course why we the evaluation and investigation is so important because we must go much further into it, right? And… and suddenly we could have met some decent men who have not been described like that before. It happens.* (Norway)

It is noteworthy that in England this is also influenced by the father's legal right to involvement - his 'Parental Responsibility' status:

*[…] I think we make sure that we ascertain father's views. They've very important and often they're the last kind of element that, or the factor that isn't always in the assessment […] we need to have his views if he's got PR [parental responsibilities].* (England)

Furthermore, social workers in Sweden, Norway and England note that fathers may have their own support needs, particularly in terms of parenting without using violence. In Sweden, the goal of keeping the family together and staging interventions for the family as a whole is explicitly expressed:

*We have premises here in […] where there are social services workers, social workers, preschool teachers, social educators who are those who work in family treatment. It is a voluntary service where you can go... for example they have counselling for parents but they also have… support and interaction, and parents*

*who do not… have significant flaws and how they manage their children. To help them to…* (Sweden)

For the most part, however, social workers in countries other than Sweden suggest providing individual support for the father, separate to the family group.

Overall, social workers overlook the father as a main carer for the children, but they do explicitly express an awareness of the importance of involving the father in a child welfare case. They also show a particular interest in gaining his perspective on the family's problems.

## 5.2 The father as a risk

As detailed in the methodology section, from the outset of the vignette, there is an implication that David may be violent towards the children and they may witness violence towards Maria. Social workers are also informed that David is a migrant and that this, perhaps, contributes to the family's problems. In the following section, we examine how these factors contribute to the ways in which the father is excluded/not included in decision-making.

### 5.2.1 *The father as a possible perpetrator of violence*

In the Irish data, whilst social workers do acknowledge the indication of domestic abuse, this is not prioritised in discussion. By contrast, from the outset, in England, Norway and Sweden the possibility of violence in the household is considered a 'risk' to the children and has a strong impact on decision-making. Initially, the need to gain more information is a priority; in Norway, social workers are obligated to start a 'Violence Clarification' assessment to evaluate the situation, which includes speaking to the children, the mother and the father:

*- [...] before we would start an investigation, we would conduct a violence clarification, and then we would want to speak with the children before speaking to the father.*
*- [...] And then you are supposed to have a one-to-one chat with each of the parents alone, and afterwards, possibly together based on what comes out. (Norway)*

The *possibility* of domestic abuse does, however, 'trigger' the view that there is a need to intervene in the family, manifesting in rapid exclusion of the father as a potential carer to the children. In England, for example, the mother is expected to remove the children from the paternal 'risk':

*- […] and the challenge here is potentially, would be that you could go in and suggest for instance, so that you talked about your husband beating the kids, and we now need to do something about that.*
*- We need you now to leave him.* (England)

Alternatively, in Norway, social workers discuss removing the father from the home to secure the safety of the children:

*- Can he in a way, yes, can he find someone who can also help him out? And move him out? After all, we ask fathers to move out. It happens.*
Researcher: -*When they're violent?*
*-Yes. I'm thinking the same day... from a purely ethical standpoint, we can't avoid providing information about what we're doing. But then... then we would have to have secured the children first. We should have control first, because we don't know what he is capable of... coming after them at school after he hears we are involved and disappearing?* (Norway)

Although, in Sweden, removing the father from the family home is not discussed, removing the children to an acute out-of-home placement *is* considered. The fact that social workers' consider using police support when visiting the family's home in an acute violent situation indicates that they consider the father to be a significant risk:

*Alright, so when we get…if we were to get this call…we have to determine that the children are not being abused. Children shall not be hit. We have to ensure that they are not being hit right now. Should she call and say…my husband is hitting my children right now and I cannot do anything to stop him, we would get into the care, probably, call the police on the way and make our way there right away. […]* (Sweden)

It should be noted that there is some, albeit limited, discussion relating to the need to support the father in changing his behaviour, and for him to learn how to parent his children without using violence. In Sweden, for example, providing family support so as to strengthen parent-child relationships is discussed, and in England it is suggested that the father might access a programme for perpetrators of domestic violence:

*It's a perpetrator programme, looking at how his behaviour is kind of impacting upon the rest of the family and the children and whether they can kind of help him to develop strategies and dealing with things a bit better.* (England)

Overall, in Norway, Sweden and England, social workers show a tendency to be risk averse, despite abuse not being confirmed. The child-focused nature of practice in these contexts, as well as the overall focus on the mother as the main carer, means that when the potential of domestic abuse is introduced, removal of the 'risk' becomes a priority. Consequently, the suspicion that the father is a perpetrator of violence, prompts immediate action by the social workers, which in turn leads to an immediate exclusion of the father as carer for his children.

### 5.2.2 *The influence of the father's migrant status and assumed cultural heritage*

To varying degrees, 'risks' related to the father's status as a migrant and assumptions made about his cultural heritage, are discussed by social workers in all four countries. This is, however, most prevalent in England and Ireland, to a lesser degree in Norway, and less still in Sweden. In England and Ireland, it is, for example, predominantly assumed that the father is not from within Europe, despite this not being stated in the vignette and some social workers make links between the father's cultural heritage and the 'risk' that they assume he poses to the family children. In Ireland, after discussing where he is from, social workers state:

*Where they are different, kind of cultural norms and you know, smacking is very common in other places and I think Ireland is only coming from that now, and so it's a big barrier, you know, kind of re-educating in other disciplinary measures really* (Ireland)

The father's cultural heritage is, therefore, perceived as potentially problematic. Similarly, in the English and Norwegian data the possible abuse is also partly explained from a perspective of cultural difference, that is, he is more likely to be violent due to the culture in his birth country:

*[…] and that might be something that they think is more acceptable than we would say is here. And so it's having those conversations with him and talking about that actually, you know, we don't think it's appropriate that you beat your children and we could potentially put in a working agreement and outline what our expectations are, would be, and get them to sign up to it. And then obviously if they're not sticking*

*to that then that would give us an idea of kind of where the case might potentially go.* (England)

By contrast, the Swedish social workers do not link the father's violent behaviour to him being an immigrant. English, Norwegian and Swedish social workers do discuss the father wanting to take the children on a trip to his country of origin as 'risky', because of the perceived possibility that the father, and his children, may not return from the trip:

*- And just because she is worried about it that he is thinking of taking them on a trip? This also makes you wonder.*
*- That maybe they will not come back, I was thinking… maybe this is what she was thinking.* (Sweden)

In Norway, social workers also link the 'risk' to the possible violence, the father's country of origin, and imply that the level of risk presented is linked to his country of origin:

*- Well, I'm thinking, perhaps he won't bring them back, return, that could also be very unsafe. [It] Must at least be secured…*
*- But that depends... do we know where he lives?* (Norway)

In sum, in three of the countries, the father is seen to pose more of a 'risk' because of his perceived culturally located parenting practices and, therefore, cultural heritage (grounded in him being a migrant). This intersects with the persistence in gendered caring expectations and child-focused, risk-averse practice. This is most prevalent in the Irish and English focus groups and to a lesser extent in the narratives of Norwegian social workers, and less still in the Swedish data.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Overall, analysis shows similarities in how social workers from Ireland, England, Norway and Sweden consider the father in the vignette in their decision making. As in previous research, he is overlooked as a carer for the family's children (Bangura Arvidsson, 2003; Baum, 2017; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Scourfield et al., 2012; Skramstad & Skivenes, 2017; Storhaug, 2013) and, here, this continues to be the case even when the mother's substance misuse accelerates. Rather than shift focus to the father, the mother continues to be the focus of service provision, and she is expected to change her problematic behaviour. This omission of the father implies, then, that in all countries, despite differing policies relating to gender equality, social workers are influenced by traditional gender norms

and continue to consider the mother to be the primary carer of the children (Maxwell et al., 2012). As Zanoni et al. (2013) discuss, influential practice approaches, linked to attachment theory, still contribute to the wide-spread belief within child welfare practice that the mother-child relationship is primary, despite this assertion being contradicted in research (Palkovitz & Hull, 2018). It is progressive, however, that in all four countries, it *is* acknowledged that fathers *should* be consulted so as to gain their perspective on the family's situation. This does not, however, translate into practice decisions relating to gendered caring expectations in the family.

Differences between the countries were identified but, in all contexts, the father was conceptualised as a risk that, for the sake of the children, needed to be managed and/or removed, with the cooperation of the mother. In England, Norway and Sweden (although not in Ireland) his possible violent behaviour towards the children and/or their mother, was one such 'risk'. The father's immigrant status, resulted in assumptions being made about his cultural heritage, ethnicity and religion, which contributed to him being assessed as a significant 'risk' in England, Norway and Ireland. In England, the mother is expected to remove the children from the paternal 'risk', whereas in Norway, the CWS suggest that the father should move out and focus should be on helping the mother to care for her children. In the data, risk discourses seem to intersect with gender discourses in ways that may possibly impact differently on men and women – implying that men carry risk and women protect from risk. The information provided about the mother's substance misuse seems to be eclipsed by the fact that the immigrant father is a possible perpetrator of violence. Positioning the father as 'risk' corresponds with research showing that fathers are frequently perceived negatively by CWS workers and as a threat/not useful/absent by social workers, albeit, at times legitimately (Maxwell et al., 2012; Scourfield, 2003; Vagli, 2009). It seems that risk discourses may be intersecting with gendered discourse in important ways that impact very differently on men and women – (certain kinds of) men carry risk and women protect from risk. This means that the notion of engagement needs to be more thoroughly deconstructed – this may not be just about gender, but about gender and risk. Whilst social workers in all countries suggest that the father may attend a perpetrator programme (Featherstone, 2014), and this is positive, we suggest that social workers, with regards to gender and ethnicity, tend to view both immigrants and men in over simplistic 'risk' terms, and as one homogenous group.

Previous research categorises Ireland and England as partly de-familialised welfare states and Norway and Sweden as de-familialised (Hantrais, 2004; Kuronen, 2010). The former is residual and has a risk-oriented approach to child-welfare, whilst the latter has a preventive, approach in child welfare (Kammer et al., 2012) and is credited as progressive in terms of gender equality (Kuronen, 2010). As social workers execute family policy, the way in which they conceptualise aims, priorities and concepts impacts on how policy transfers into practice

(Author et al., 2017). In our data, however, the father was assessed as a 'risk' in all countries, either as a *possible* perpetrator of violence and/or due to *assumptions* made about his cultural heritage. This discrepancy can be interpreted as the result of both the complexity innate in any welfare state but also as a 'policy-practice gap'. Further, Gilbert et al. (2011) argues that child welfare systems are becoming more similar as they move towards a child focus promoting children's own independent relationship with the state. The convergence, on a practice level, between the four countries and two welfare regimes represented, can also be seen to affirm Gilbert's argument. Perhaps, the shift towards a child-focused welfare system has not contributed to a greater inclusion of fathers?

Overall, then, although policy promoting the inclusion of fathers in their children's lives does differ in the countries considered, accounts show that this did not translate into social work practice and fathers were marginalised in all countries, indicating a gap between policy and practice. Future research should focus on possible explanations for this policy/practice gap to facilitate the development of a more gender-sensitive social work practice that ultimately benefits the well-being and development of the children whom child welfare workers encounter on a daily basis.

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