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A Feminist Ethics of Fatherhood

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of an ethics of fatherhood and develops the concept of feminist fatherhood in response. Such feminist fatherhood is grounded in a notion of feminist masculinity, which draws on feminist ethics and advocates for equality, gender equity, care, and the dismantling of injustice. Fatherhood becomes feminist, then, when fathers embody these ideals in their role as fathers. I propose that feminist fatherhood can be understood across three dimensions. First, feminist fatherhood involves a specific way of relating to one's children—namely, an engaged, present, and empathetic approach to parenting that aims for equality and justice in child-rearing. Second, feminist fatherhood is reflected in the father's relationship with the mother and partner. It is also about how caregiving responsibilities and domestic labor are shared. Third, there is a societal and political dimension to feminist fatherhood, which is expressed in fathers' engagement for gender justice more broadly, and in their support for the structures, institutions, policies, and laws that make feminist fatherhood possible and sustainable.

1. Introduction

Fathers today understand their roles in more pluralistic ways (Johansson 2023). There are certainly still fathers who adhere to traditional gender roles, remaining largely absent from childcare and housework, leaving these responsibilities to the mothers. On the other hand, there are many fathers who are engaged, empathetic, and present in their children's lives. And there are many fathers who want to be like that but struggle due to structural constraints, economic necessities, or other obstacles—and who suffer from the feeling that they are not good fathers. In addition, there is a growing trend toward more plural and diverse understandings of gender roles and societal expectations. As a result, the expectations regarding how fathers and mothers should behave are also changing. Given this background, some might wonder if fathers truly bring something unique to parenting that mothers do not. Are both parents not equally capable of caregiving, regardless of gender? These are valid questions, challenging the notion that fatherhood is inherently different from motherhood. However, this paper argues that

fatherhood remains a meaningful role. By exploring what it means to be a good father and what specific responsibilities this role entails, we can better understand the complexities of an ethics of fatherhood. This paper introduces the concept of a feminist ethics of fatherhood, exploring how men can adopt feminist principles to create more equitable and just family dynamics. By rethinking both masculinity and fatherhood through a feminist lens, we can address the challenges and opportunities that men face in redefining their roles as fathers. The goal is to explore how fatherhood can move beyond traditional gender norms, fostering healthier family relationships and contributing to a more just and inclusive society.

The first section, “Social fatherhood,” defines the concept of a man taking on fatherly responsibilities for a child, even when he is not biologically related to them. It emphasizes that fatherhood is about actively participating in a child’s life—caring for, guiding, and supporting them. Social fatherhood is based on action and involvement rather than biology. It highlights that what makes someone a father is not simply their biological connection, but the day-to-day responsibility and presence they provide as well as their positive emotional involvement. The next, “Fatherhood and masculinity,” examines how traditional masculinity can hinder good fatherhood. It questions whether the traditional image of masculinity is compatible with being a nurturing and emotionally available father. By introducing the idea of feminist masculinity, adopted from Ben Almassi (Almassi 2022), the section argues for a new understanding of masculinity—one that prioritizes care, justice, and equality. Fathers who embrace this redefined masculinity can build deeper emotional bonds with their children and contribute to breaking down patriarchal structures that often limit their role in parenting. Yet this transformation is not simply a matter of negation. The section also considers which elements of traditional fatherhood might be worth preserving when reinterpreted through a feminist lens. In the fourth section “Fatherhood and parenting,” I then discuss the specific role of fathers in their relationship with their children. I argue that feminist fathers are good parents and that gender-neutral elements such as caring are important for this. However, as men, fathers have a specific position towards their children, as they are always examples of their gender role and have specific advantages in patriarchy that affect how they can fulfil their parental role. In “Fatherhood and partnership,” the paper explores the dynamics of co-parenting in heterosexual relationships. Good fatherhood, it argues, means more than just being present for the fun moments; it requires fathers to take on an equal share of parenting responsibilities. Through the lens of feminist masculinity, fathers are encouraged to question traditional gender roles and share caregiving equally with their partners. This creates a more balanced and supportive family environment, which benefits both the children and the parents. Finally, the section on “Fatherhood and society” looks at how societal norms and structures shape fatherhood. It argues that being a good father is not only a personal task but also a political one. Fathers must recognize the broader societal expectations that influence their role and work toward greater social justice. Those who adopt feminist masculinity should advocate for policies that support all parents, particularly those facing systemic inequalities. This section develops the argument for why fathers, specifically in their role as fathers, are well positioned to resist certain forms of injustice, while also clarifying that this does not entail an obligation to engage with every progressive cause. Rather, the political responsibilities of feminist fatherhood emerge from the specific intersection of gender, care, and structural power that fathers navigate.

2. Social fatherhood

From the outset, it is essential to clarify that this paper is concerned with social fatherhood (Hendricks 2016), not genetic relationships. In most families, the genetic and social relationships with children coincide. However, in contemporary society, in a growing number of families children are raised by men who are not their genetic fathers. These situations arise for various reasons, such as divorce, remarriage, adoption, sperm donation, or other familial circumstances. In such instances, another man than the genetic father assumes the role of the social father, playing a pivotal part in the child's upbringing and daily life. This does not necessarily mean that the genetic father no longer holds any responsibility. Indeed, genetic fathers who do not take an active role in raising their children, whether by choice or circumstance, still carry ethical obligations toward their offspring. While these ethical considerations are significant, my focus here is solely on the role and responsibilities of social fathers, setting aside the complex issues surrounding genetic fatherhood for the purposes of this discussion (Gheaus 2012).

I propose that a basic definition of social fatherhood includes several critical elements: (1) A social father is a man who steps into the role of fatherhood for a child, even though he may not be the child's biological father. (2) This man is recognized by the child as a father figure and is actively involved in the child's life in this capacity. Social fatherhood emerges from the everyday practice of caring for and supporting the child, meaning it is a lived experience rather than a mere title. It is through regular interaction, guidance, and presence that a man becomes a social father. (3) A social father assumes crucial responsibilities in the areas of upbringing, care, and provision for the child. These functions are carried out not in a professional role—as one might expect from a teacher, caregiver, or social worker—but in the personal role of a father figure. A social father, by virtue of his role, is not bound by professional codes or guidelines. Instead, the practice of social fatherhood is flexible, open to adaptation, and shaped by personal understanding, relationship dynamics, social norms and expectations. Here, it is useful to distinguish between moral and social fatherhood. When social fatherhood is mentioned as involving the assumption of certain responsibilities, these are not yet meant in a moral sense—that is, they are not yet ethically justified. My point here is simply that social fatherhood is grounded in action, and that this action refers to certain norms. What kind of actions and which norms—and thus also which responsibilities—fathers should adopt is a question addressed in this essay, but it is not something that is necessarily part of the concept of social fatherhood itself. There can also be forms of social fatherhood that involve morally questionable or outright immoral actions—for example, when a social norm permits or requires fathers to use corporal punishment in child-rearing. (4) Finally, a social father consciously identifies himself as a father and he embraces this identity in his relationship with the child.

It is worth noting that there is an inherent openness in this concept of social fatherhood. For example, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between a person who fulfills some or even all of the aforementioned criteria but is seen more as an uncle or a paternal friend rather than a social father. In other words, the boundaries between father figure, a father role, and being a social father are not always clear-cut. The distinction between these roles can vary depending on the specific family dynamic and individual circumstances. While there are cultural norms and practices that shape the expectations of fatherhood in a given society, these norms are not universally applied, nor do they guarantee that everyone will conform to them (Seward and Stanley-Stevens 2014). Variation and flexibility are inevitable, and this fluidity makes it challenging to

establish hard and fast rules about who qualifies as a social father. An important aspect of my concept of social fatherhood is that it is rooted in practice rather than emotions. While it is true that most social fathers likely have a deep emotional bond with the children they care for and love them, I do not believe that emotions alone should be the determining factor in whether someone qualifies as a social father. Excluding men who may not feel strong emotional attachment but still fulfill the role of a father would be misguided. Social fatherhood, as I define it, is about fulfilling the responsibilities and duties that come with the role. A man who provides for a child, takes care of them, and participates in their upbringing is still a father, regardless of the intensity of his feelings toward the child. Therefore, a social father is someone who actively practices fatherhood in a child's life, not just someone who loves the child deeply.

Maybe the most controversial element of this concept is the assertion that only men can be fathers. This is not to say that there are specific actions or responsibilities that only men are capable of performing. The division between fatherhood and motherhood is not based on particular tasks that are exclusive to one gender. In fact, most of the duties that men perform as fathers—such as providing emotional support, guiding the child through life's challenges, or engaging in play—can equally be performed by women, and vice versa. There is no inherent difference in the types of actions that men and women can take in raising a child. However, despite the overlap in capabilities, there is a distinction in the roles of fathers and mothers that remains relevant. The existence of men gives rise to fathers, just as the existence of women gives rise to mothers. These roles, while not rigidly defined by specific tasks, still carry societal and cultural significance. Not every man is a father, and not every woman is a mother, but when a man takes on the responsibilities of fatherhood, he becomes a father. This is a role tied to the identity and gender of the individual. It is not about reinforcing traditional gender norms or suggesting that men or women are inherently better suited to certain tasks. Rather, it acknowledges that fatherhood, as a concept, has historically and culturally been associated with men, and this remains a meaningful distinction even in modern societies. In this paper, I do not adopt an essentialist understanding of men. Instead, I will use “men” while remaining mindful of the complexities and diversities of gender identities (Mikkola 2024).

3. Fatherhood and masculinity

Masculinity often does not have a good reputation, and this is not without reason. It is often seen as a shorthand for violence, oppression, lack of empathy, and many other negative traits. One of the many studies that provide and summarize empirical evidence for this is the review of Edward W. Morris and Kathleen Ratajczak (2019), which explores how “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) is a core concept in understanding men's violence against women. They explain that hegemonic masculinity, which embodies the socially dominant form of masculinity, promotes the idea that men must maintain power and control over women and other men. This dominance is often reinforced through violence, particularly when men feel their masculine status is challenged. Morris and Ratajczak conclude that hegemonic masculinity not only encourages violence as a means to reassert control but also normalizes aggression as part of what it means to be a “real” man.¹

¹It is worth noting that mothers not always do better. For example, Jennifer E. Lansford and her colleagues (Lansford 2017) found that mothers tend to use corporal punishment more frequently than fathers, but the patterns vary significantly based on cultural context. Fathers were generally less involved in

Therefore, it seems more productive, as others have suggested, to think about new forms of masculinity that transcend its toxic² elements rather than trying to eliminate masculinity altogether. This strikes me already as a utopian goal, yet one that is highly relevant to the present moment in which we live, where society remains deeply organized around gender norms. In line with this thinking, I follow the ideas of Ben Almassi (2022), who, drawing on the work of scholars such as bell hooks (2005) and Michael Kimmel (2010), has proposed a concept of feminist masculinity. According to Almassi, feminist masculinity is oriented toward justice, connection, care, and reciprocity, rather than power and oppression. This new form of masculinity recognizes that male hegemony and privilege cannot simply be discarded or ignored. Even when men try to overcome these structures in their personal lives, the broader societal influences of patriarchy still persist. Feminist masculinity positions men as allies in a collective feminist project, encouraging them to reflect on their own participation in patriarchal structures and to understand their situatedness within these systems. Almassi argues that feminist masculinity is inherently a political project; it is not merely an internal mindset or attitude but is made real through practice and participation in feminist efforts. In this way, men who embrace feminist masculinity actively contribute to dismantling oppressive systems rather than passively benefitting from them. This is in line with the notion of ally proposed by Holly Lawford-Smith and William Tuckwell in the context of social justice (Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell 2024). They define an ally as a privileged individual who engages in actions aimed at ending the oppression of disadvantaged groups. These actions must be “resistant” and well-founded, and ideally, authorized by the oppressed group, either explicitly or by default. The relationship between an ally and the oppressed group is “regrettably” hierarchical, but the ultimate goal is to work towards eliminating this imbalance. Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell emphasize that allyship is not merely a status but a continuous effort that requires sensitivity to the oppressed group’s needs and goals.

Feminist masculinity is an important component of feminist fatherhood, since fatherhood and masculinity are closely interconnected (with fathers being able to live out and value very different forms of masculinity). One important reason for linking feminist masculinity as the basis of feminist fatherhood is the fact that, as many studies show, masculinity has a decisive influence on how fathers understand and realize their fatherhood (Petts et al. 2018; Hunter et al. 2017; Lewington et al. 2021). They explore how the clash between hegemonic masculinity and the “new fatherhood ideal” influences fathering behavior. Fathers who closely align with traditional masculine norms tend to be less involved in nurturing and caregiving roles and more likely to engage in harsh discipline. In contrast, those who embrace the new fatherhood ideal, which emphasizes emotional engagement and caregiving, are more involved in their children’s lives. The role of fathers is thus strongly shaped by their role as men and the corresponding norms. If we want to change fatherhood, we therefore need to change

day-to-day discipline, but when they did use corporal punishment, it was often harsher compared to mothers. Boys were more likely to experience corporal punishment than girls, with cultural norms playing a significant role in these gendered differences.

²Carol Harrington (2021) argues that feminists should be cautious in adopting “toxic masculinity” as an analytical tool, as it tends to individualize gender inequality and reinforce existing hierarchies. She explores how the term evolved from addressing marginalized men’s behaviors, often linked to violence and disengagement from family life, into a critique used to characterize misogyny, homophobia, and aggression in elite men, particularly after the rise of movements like #MeToo.

masculinity. Almassi provides a good starting point for this, but it needs further specification regarding the tasks that fathers are expected to take on, as well as their role and their relationship to their children and their partners, the mothers. This is why feminist fatherhood cannot simply be reduced to being a feminist man; rather, an ethic of fatherhood must indicate what defines fathers and what responsibilities they hold toward whom. Fathers who embrace feminist masculinity are more likely to engage in equitable relationships with their partners and to model values of care and justice for their children. Such fathers reject the notion that being a “real man” means being emotionally distant, controlling, or dominant. Instead, they see their role as one that involves fostering connection and care both within the family and in the broader society. This approach to masculinity not only benefits fathers and their children but also contributes to the dismantling of patriarchal structures on a larger scale. Yet this does not entail a wholesale rejection of all traditional norms of fatherhood. A critical feminist approach requires us to ask which elements of traditional fatherhood have been problematic and which might be worth preserving—though reinterpreted and freed from their oppressive context. For instance, traditional fatherhood has often emphasized the father’s role as protector and provider of security—not merely material security, but also emotional steadiness and a sense of safety in the world. When disentangled from associations with control, domination, and emotional distance, this protective dimension can be valuable. Similarly, the transmission of competence in navigating the public sphere, in developing resilience and confidence, need not be abandoned simply because they have historically been associated with masculinity. The question is not whether fathers should provide security or teach resilience, but rather how these functions can be enacted in ways that are consistent with care, equality, and justice. A feminist fatherhood thus involves a selective appropriation: it retains those aspects of traditional fatherhood that serve the well-being of children and the flourishing of families, while discarding those elements—such as authoritarianism, emotional unavailability, or the monopolization of decision-making power—that perpetuate patriarchal structures. This selective retention is not a compromise with patriarchy but rather a recognition that not all gendered practices are equally harmful, and that transformation need not mean total abolition.

In this sense, feminist fatherhood is related to other new forms of fatherhood and masculinity that have emerged in recent years. These include, for example, caring masculinity (Hunter et al. 2017; Elliott 2016)—a form of masculinity that places care and empathy at its core—as well as involved or intimate fatherhood (Machin 2015; Dermott 2003), which seeks active participation in child-rearing, emphasizes emotional involvement in particular, and also includes the assumption of practical caregiving tasks. All of these forms position themselves in contrast to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2019), which is characterized by traits such as emotional distance, power, work, competition, and especially dominance over women. Given the enduring influence of hegemonic masculinity—along with the norms, expectations, structures, and institutions that uphold it—it is important to recognize that feminist masculinity continues to be marginalized in many areas and often encounters resistance. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is particularly helpful in understanding this dynamic, as it addresses not only the relationship between men and women but also the relationships among men themselves. This is why Connell distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from marginalized and subordinate masculinities—men who, while still benefitting from being men in a patriarchal system, are devalued by other men and lack the same privileges, power, or access to resources. It is therefore

reasonable to assume that fathers who embody a feminist masculinity—one that explicitly calls into question male privilege and power—are likely to encounter resistance, especially from other men seeking to defend their hegemonic positions. At the same time, in today's highly differentiated society—marked by the existence of multiple hegemonic masculinities (Coles 2009)—these dynamics vary significantly depending on social milieu, class, and socio-economic status. Some feminist men likely find it easier than others to live out their feminist masculinity and to embody it in their roles as fathers. Furthermore, as masculinity researchers have pointed out, even feminist men may unconsciously reproduce hegemonic norms, just as feminist fathers may benefit from certain advantages linked to their feminist stance, depending on their social position. For example, it is not uncommon for engaged fathers to be praised for their involvement, whereas for mothers such engagement is still considered a given. Similarly, while mothers continue to face the so-called motherhood penalty in the workplace (Yu and Hara 2021), fathers may actually benefit from their status as involved parents.

4. Fatherhood and parenting

A good childhood does not necessarily require the presence of a social father. However, good fatherhood cannot be understood without reference to the well-being of the child. Therefore, good fatherhood demands something more than simply being a “good man,” such as being a feminist ally in the sense proposed by Almassi. The essential focus must be on good parenting as a whole. Yet this immediately raises a question that is central to the ethics of fatherhood: If good parenting is the goal, and if mothers and fathers are equally capable of performing most parenting tasks, what—if anything—is distinctive about fatherhood? Why speak of fatherhood at all, rather than simply of good parenting in gender-neutral terms?

There are elements of good parenting that can be substituted by other agents or institutions, and then there are those that cannot be replaced. For example, if we consider the current expectation that parents are responsible for the material well-being of their children, this is more a question of social, economic, and political circumstances. In principle, it is possible to relieve parents of this responsibility through measures like a guaranteed child allowance, which would ensure that all children are provided with the material resources necessary for a good childhood. If society were to sufficiently equip all children with the needed resources, via their parents, then the material aspects of parenting would no longer be a central component of good parenthood. Since we do not yet live in such a society, parents continue to bear this responsibility, to some extent, even if these dimensions could theoretically be substituted. Parents, therefore, must ensure that their children have a materially sufficient childhood, provided they have the means to do so and if they lack the capacities to do so, the state has an obligation to support them (Schweiger 2019). However, social parenting also involves aspects that cannot be easily taken over by society, or if they are, it would come with a qualitative loss. These include love, emotional attachment, trust, and the care that stems from these bonds (Alstott 2004; Liao 2006). For reasons such as these, thinkers like David Archard (2010a) have defended the family as a necessary institution, even though it does not always produce optimal social outcomes. I agree with those theorists who argue that parents are responsible for providing their children with an “adequately good” childhood, not necessarily a “perfect” or maximally good one (Shields 2016; Clayton 2006; Brighouse and Swift 2014; Schweiger and Graf 2015). The focus should be on what is

sufficient for the child's well-being, rather than on striving for an unattainable ideal. But where do fathers fit into this picture?

The first response is straightforward: yes, good fatherhood fundamentally means that a man practices good parenting. Simply striving for good parenting would already represent a significant improvement for many fathers. This would involve aligning their actions with the principles of good parenthood that apply to all caregivers. Teresa Baron recently discussed the ethical considerations surrounding fatherhood, as well as the rights and duties of fathers (Baron 2023). I agree with Baron that parental obligations are morally prior to parental rights. Therefore, the ethical foundation of fatherhood is built on the premise that fathers must first and foremost meet their responsibilities toward their children, and it is through the execution of these responsibilities that they can legitimately claim rights as parents. Fathers, like mothers, have a moral duty to act in the best interests of their children. This duty extends beyond mere provision and protection to include nurturing and supporting the child's development. However, as Baron argues, and supported by empirical research on fatherhood, societal norms often place fathers in a position where their role is seen primarily as that of a provider, which can overshadow their other ethical responsibilities. If the matter ended here, however, there would be little reason to develop a specific ethics of fatherhood. We could simply apply existing theories of good parenting to men who happen to be parents. Yet such an approach would miss something crucial.

The second response is that speaking only of good parenting overlooks the social embeddedness and specificity of fatherhood. What we should focus on is what prevents fathers from being good fathers and, conversely, what enables them to fulfill this role effectively. Just as it would be misguided to deny the social embedding of mothers, along with the specific norms that govern and evaluate their behavior, it would be equally wrong to adopt a gender-blind approach to fatherhood. Fathers, due to their masculinity, hold certain privileges, but they are also subject to societal expectations—sometimes from their partners or other caregivers, such as mothers. Fathers face distinct pressures tied to traditional notions of masculinity, and this shapes both how they parent and how they are perceived as parents. More fundamentally, fathers occupy a distinctive structural position within gendered systems of care and power. They are simultaneously beneficiaries of patriarchal privilege and potential agents of its transformation. Unlike mothers, who are often overburdened by care expectations and penalized for their caregiving, fathers benefit from a system that expects less of them while granting them greater authority and freedom. This asymmetry is not merely a personal advantage but a structural feature of gender relations. When fathers choose to engage in caregiving despite having the structural option not to, they do something different from what mothers do when they engage in the same tasks. For mothers, intensive caregiving is often a response to overwhelming social expectations; for fathers, it is frequently an act of resistance against the norms that would excuse them from such involvement. This is why feminist fatherhood cannot be reduced to good parenting in general: it must account for the particular structural location fathers occupy and the specific ways in which their actions either reproduce or challenge patriarchal arrangements.

Thirdly, and relatedly, one should not naively assume that gender can simply be ignored when it comes to parenting. Regardless of one's stance on various psycho-social theories of socialization and parenting, fatherhood is almost universally seen as playing a specific role in shaping children's perceptions of masculinity and what it means to be a father. Fathers, through their behavior and interactions with their children, convey

powerful images of what being a man and a father entails. These impressions have a lasting impact on how children come to understand gender and the role of fathers in their lives. An ethic of fatherhood, therefore, must pay special attention to this influence and the intergenerational transmission of gender roles and norms, alongside all the other tasks involved in ensuring a good childhood. Feminist fatherhood involves critically engaging with this process and actively contributing to the establishment of new role models and norms—ones that can at least be made available to children as possible alternatives. Two interconnected arguments can be made here for why masculinity and fatherhood matter, arguments that together help to clarify what is distinctive about fatherhood. First, empirical research shows that fathers play an important role in ensuring a positive childhood — especially fathers who are present, involved, engaged, and empathetic. Such fathers have been shown to have many positive effects on children's development, whereas traditional forms of fatherhood, which are based on hegemonic ideals of masculinity, tend to be less beneficial or even harmful (Morawska 2020; Henry et al. 2020). What matters here is not that fathers perform tasks that mothers cannot perform, but rather that the presence of an engaged, caring father provides children with a living counterexample to hegemonic masculinity. When a man—someone socially recognized as a man, with all the privileges and expectations that entails—engages in care, demonstrates vulnerability, shares power, and rejects dominance, he embodies a different possibility for masculinity. This is not something that mothers, however feminist, can provide in the same way, precisely because they are not recognized as men. The distinctiveness of fatherhood, then, lies not in any unique task or capacity, but in the particular symbolic and practical intervention that caring, egalitarian fathers make within systems of gender.

Second, research on socialization highlights the central role of parents in the transmission of gender norms and roles (Cerbara et al. 2022; Leaper and Farkas 2015). Fathers who practice feminist fatherhood can thus offer their children alternative role models—serving as a counterweight to the dominant cultural and media representations of traditional gender roles. This is particularly important when it comes to which norms and ideals of fatherhood and motherhood are passed down and modeled. Since masculinity is closely linked to what fathers model to their sons, fatherhood is inherently bound up with what fathers present to their sons as future fathers (Schwarzenbacher and Baser 2023). Similarly, fathers who embody feminist fatherhood—who enact values of care and equity through the way they raise their children—provide a practical demonstration of how such values can be lived out. In this sense, feminist fatherhood is also a form of value education. Children do not merely observe that care can be performed by anyone; they observe specifically that men can care, that masculinity can be compatible with tenderness, that fathers can be emotionally present. This observation has implications for how children—both sons and daughters—come to understand gender possibilities. The distinctiveness of fatherhood, from this perspective, lies in its capacity to intervene in the reproduction of gender norms at a crucial site: the family, where children first learn what it means to be gendered beings.

Of course, this does not guarantee that the children of feminist fathers will themselves become feminists or critically reflect on gender roles, let alone incorporate these values into their own lives. But if socialization research is correct, such outcomes do become more likely. At the same time, it is important to recognize that feminist fatherhood poses a challenge—especially when it requires men to go against dominant and deeply ingrained norms and expectations, and to actively resist hegemonic notions of masculinity. This can lead to inner conflict for men, particularly when raising their children

in ways that differ from how they themselves were raised, or when their approaches contradict broader social expectations of what fatherhood should look like. Thus, it is important for fathers to reflect on their parenting practices, continually striving to align them with principles of justice and care, while also being aware of the societal pressures they face. Ultimately, it is also an empirical question as to how well individual people—fathers in particular—can succeed in shedding internalized norms or standing up against them, both privately and in public, in order to practice feminist fatherhood. Sociological research on the transformation of masculinity and fatherhood offers legitimate grounds for hope in this regard. It shows, for example, that hegemonic masculinity or what one might call, following Pierre Bourdieu, the “male habitus,” which maintains masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001), can indeed change (McLeod 2005; Duncanson 2015; Elliott 2016). A different way of “doing gender,” and thus a different way of “doing fatherhood,” is possible, but it usually requires reflection and active engagement—particularly on the part of fathers—with their male privileges, as well as with what Connell and others refer to as complicity in patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Etchells et al. 2017). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the possibilities for such change can vary greatly from one individual to another. However, the ethical demand that one engage reflectively with one’s own masculinity and conceptions of fatherhood is not, in principle, overly burdensome—just as it is not unreasonable to expect parents in general to concern themselves with what good parenting entails and to strive to be good enough parents for their children (Shields 2016; Brighouse and Swift 2014).

5. Fatherhood and partnership

Not all fathers are in a partnership, and not all fathers are in a relationship with the mother of their children. However, the model of raising children together is still the most widespread and also one that many people aspire to. While good fatherhood can be achieved by a single parent, it presents significant challenges, particularly in societies heavily focused on the two-parent family model. Most fathers, however, do not raise their children alone; they do so alongside the child’s mother, often within a romantic partnership. This partnership dimension is crucial to understanding feminist fatherhood, for it is here—in the day-to-day negotiation of care responsibilities and domestic labor—that the tensions between egalitarian ideals and patriarchal structures become most acute.

Even though social reality was always more differentiated, there existed for a long time a culturally influential—one might say hegemonic—ideal in which fathers were responsible for economic provision while mothers were in charge of the household and children. Modern societies have witnessed significant shifts, including the increasing emotional involvement of fathers, the move toward equal partnerships in family dynamics, and the dual-earner model where both parents work (Peukert 2019). Despite these changes in societal discourse, the practical application often lags behind. These dynamics shape the partnership itself—particularly the distribution of caregiving responsibilities for the children, but also domestic labor more broadly. Housework is foundational to many other daily activities, and the partner who does not carry it out directly benefits—for instance, by gaining time for paid work or leisure. This is why feminist fatherhood is not only about the relationship with the child, but also deeply connected to the relationship with the partner and mother. It is still most often mothers

who take on the majority of these tasks within families, a disparity that reflects and reinforces broader structures of gender inequality.

Feminist fatherhood requires a reflection on familial and partnership arrangements, with the goal of shaping them in line with feminist values: equality, care, reciprocity, and mutual partnership. This also involves a constant awareness that the personal is political—that private arrangements and the division of caregiving and domestic labor are not merely private matters but are embedded in broader social and political structures. Yet reflection alone is insufficient. Feminist fatherhood demands concrete action: fully engaging in the care of children and supporting one's partner—ensuring she is not left alone with this labor, nor made to carry the majority of it, especially the more exhausting or less prestigious tasks. This means not cherry-picking tasks or continuing to enjoy privileges while avoiding less desirable responsibilities. It means taking on night wakings as often as one's partner does, managing the mental load of household organization (remembering appointments, planning meals, anticipating needs), and doing the mundane, repetitive work that makes family life possible. As Almassi puts it, it is about being a true ally—in child-rearing, in household duties, and in all aspects of parenting. It also involves recognizing and valuing what one's partner does—not taking her labor for granted or naturalizing caregiving or motherhood as something women simply do because they are women. This appreciation in the private sphere is one side of the coin. The other is the recognition that mothers are subjected to different social norms and expectations than fathers—often much more constraining ones (Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2019). Feminist fatherhood requires men to acknowledge that their partners, as mothers, face societal pressures in a patriarchal system that limits their freedom and places demands on them that are stressful and often impossible to fulfill. Practicing feminist partnership, then, also means standing together against these norms—living out alternative forms of parenting wherever possible. And where such resistance is constrained by political or structural limitations, it means supporting one's partner in resisting overwhelming expectations of motherhood, and not reinforcing or expecting her to meet them.

As feminist thinkers such as Susan Moller Okin (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1994) have argued, the family long remained a blind spot in theories of justice. While the fair distribution of public goods took center stage, the private sphere of the family—including care work, housework, and how such work is divided between partners—was overlooked and left as a private matter. A feminist fatherhood challenges this. It involves distributing tasks within the family in a just way, while recognizing that “fairness” cannot simply mean fathers and mothers agreeing on something under structurally unequal conditions. Naturally, the communication and negotiation between fathers and mothers about how they concretely arrange things plays a major role, and it would be intrusive for the state or others to intervene directly. At the same time, however, it would be naive—and would ignore the patriarchal structures in which we live—to underestimate the conditions under which fathers and mothers talk to each other and work out the distribution of childcare and housework among themselves. Thus, feminist fatherhood is practiced concretely on an individual level, aiming toward equality, communication, and negotiation, but it also requires a critical reflection on the fact that men and women in society still occupy unequal positions—which inevitably shapes their private agreements. From an egalitarian perspective, which considers fathers to be equally responsible for childcare as mothers and recognizes no “natural order” of the sexes, any deviation from an equal division of responsibilities must be justified. It is

therefore not enough merely to acknowledge that mothers do more work for children and around the household (Gregoratto 2016; Wimbauer 2023); rather, this must be critically scrutinized and changed. Such change can only take place if broader structures also shift—and if fathers themselves change, become actively involved, and refrain from taking advantage of their privileges to maintain an unjust division of labor.

Yet good fatherhood can sometimes be hindered by the dynamics of the partnership itself. If, for any number of reasons, a partner is not interested in approaching parenthood through the lens of equality—due to personal beliefs, unresolved conflicts, or differing values—it becomes much harder for the father to fulfill the ideals of feminist masculinity. In the literature some of these phenomena are discussed under the concept of “maternal gatekeeping” (Puhlman and Pasley 2013), which refers to behaviors or attitudes from mothers that influence or limit fathers’ involvement in childcare and household responsibilities. While maternal gatekeeping presents a real challenge for fathers seeking greater involvement, it is crucial to contextualize this phenomenon within the broader structures of gender inequality that produce it. Gatekeeping behaviors often emerge not from mothers’ inherent possessiveness but from their socialization into intensive mothering ideals, from their (often justified) lack of confidence in fathers’ competence (given that many fathers have not been socialized to develop caregiving skills), and from anxiety about being judged as bad mothers if they delegate too much. Moreover, as Gaunt and Pinho (Gaunt and Pinho 2018) note, mothers who embrace traditional gender ideologies are more likely to engage in gatekeeping, suggesting that the problem is not motherhood *per se* but rather the persistence of sexist norms. Fathers who are committed to feminist fatherhood must therefore approach gatekeeping not as an obstacle imposed by their partners, but as a symptom of the same patriarchal structures they seek to resist. The solution lies not in demanding that mothers “let go” but rather in fathers persistently demonstrating competence, reliability, and genuine partnership over time, thereby gradually building the trust and shared understanding that makes egalitarian co-parenting possible.

Parenting functions best as a collaborative effort, and when one partner refuses to engage on egalitarian terms, the balance collapses. Yet fathers also face external pressures that complicate their efforts to practice feminist fatherhood. They often confront competing societal messages about what their role should be, leading to inner conflicts as they try to reconcile demands for both traditional breadwinning and involved caregiving (Gruson-Wood et al. 2022). Feminist masculinity offers a way to navigate these tensions by insisting that men’s roles need not be confined to outdated models. Instead, fathers can integrate care, empathy, and active involvement into their roles, challenging the conventional notion that men must choose between being breadwinners or caregivers.

6. Fatherhood and society

Fatherhood is both a private and public matter; the personal is political, and the political is personal and because of this an ethics of fatherhood can be situated on multiple levels. It can focus on providing concrete guidance for individual fathers, or it can address broader societal structures, policies or laws examining the values and norms that shape family life. I want to emphasize three aspects of the interconnection between society and feminist fatherhood.

First, as has been noted several times, fatherhood does not take place in a vacuum; it is socially shaped—by norms, structures, and institutions, by the law, the labor market, and social policy. This interconnection is relevant at all levels of an ethics of fatherhood

and therefore for the project of feminist fatherhood. Even an ethical approach that focuses on what fathers should do in their private family lives—in order to embody feminist masculinity and be good fathers to their children—must confront the fact that fathers are always shaped by social conditions. Individual ethical responsibility thus necessarily points to the social and political sphere, even though this sphere does not entirely determine what fathers can or should do. All the ideals of good fatherhood that have been discussed so far, as well as everything that stands in the way of achieving these ideals, are inherently linked to the society we live in. Society, however, is not easy to define. Social theory often presents different key themes and concepts, and we observe a coexistence of old and new social norms and practices, often with conflicting tendencies. One term that captures this complexity is “uncertainty through individualization,” where modern life leads to increasingly diverse and individualized ways of living (Honneth 2004). In this context, it becomes difficult to draw a clear line between societal norms and personal behavior. Moreover, the relationship between the micro and macro levels—between individual family dynamics and the larger societal framework—cannot be seamlessly translated. What happens within a specific family is influenced by societal structures, but it is not wholly determined by them, just as society is not merely an aggregation of individual family arrangements.

Second, this interconnection must also be understood to mean that an ethics of fatherhood must ask which social norms, practices, and institutions support feminist fatherhood—and which ones hinder it. In this sense, feminist fatherhood is tied to the broader project of feminist ethics, which takes structural injustice and gender politics into view (Okin 1989; Fraser 1994). But this does not simply mean calling for gender justice in general—such as the fair distribution of positions, power, resources, work, and recognition. It means asking concretely how the roles and responsibilities of parents can be distributed fairly, what kinds of policies are needed to make feminist fatherhood possible in the private sphere, and how dominant norms of masculinity—as well as the expectations and scripts that shape men’s behavior as fathers—need to change. Based on the reflections developed in this paper, and drawing on the rich body of feminist literature in ethics and the social sciences, it can be argued that policies which support fathers—policies that enable them to be present, involved, and engaged—are necessary (Dermott 2018; Collins et al. 2023; Grau Grau et al. 2022). These must be accompanied by a shift in social norms: feminist fatherhood should not be treated as a “nice to have,” or something for which fathers deserve special praise or benefits. It should be normal. The societal level, in this sense, is about creating the conditions that make feminist fatherhood truly possible.

Third, however, we should not assume a one-sided relationship in which the social level determines the individual without any feedback loop. Rather, social norms, structures, and institutions—whether they enable or hinder feminist fatherhood—can be transformed through individual actions, especially when those actions are collective and coordinated. This brings us to the political task and responsibility of feminist fatherhood: to contribute to social change. It is here—in the articulation of the political dimension of feminist fatherhood—that a crucial question arises: What exactly are fathers responsible for? Does embracing feminist fatherhood entail solidarity with all progressive causes, or are there specific responsibilities that flow from the particular role fathers occupy?

The answer, I argue, is that the political responsibilities of feminist fatherhood are bounded and specific. They arise from fathers’ particular structural location within gendered systems of care and power, rather than from a general commitment to justice.

This is not to deny that fathers, like all individuals, have general obligations to oppose injustice. But what makes these obligations specifically obligations of fatherhood is their connection to the gendered structures that shape parenting, family life, and the reproduction of gender norms. In other words, the political dimension of feminist fatherhood is not unlimited; it is oriented toward those forms of injustice that are directly implicated in the conditions under which fatherhood is practiced and in the gender relations that fatherhood helps to constitute.

Why should fatherhood entail these particular political responsibilities and not others? The rationale lies in three interconnected considerations. First, fathers are implicated in and benefit from the very structures of gender inequality that feminist politics seeks to dismantle. The privileges fathers enjoy—greater freedom from care expectations, higher earnings, more authority in public and private spheres—are not accidental but are produced by systemic arrangements that disadvantage women and mothers. Allyship, as Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell (2024) argue, involves taking action to end the oppression from which one benefits. For fathers, this means a special responsibility to challenge the gender structures that advantage them. In this sense, fathers—as Almassi writes (2022)—can be allies in feminist political transformation, in efforts toward greater gender justice. This involves not only striving to be better fathers but also engaging in the public sphere, in civil society and politics, in support of feminist goals—and thereby supporting the concerns of their partners and the mothers of their children. While it is reasonable to assume that fathers too will benefit from living in a more just society, it remains the case that it is women and mothers who stand to gain the most—because they are the ones who, currently, bear the greatest burdens. Fathers are not merely responsible for their own individual families but also have a duty to recognize and challenge those societal structures that directly shape the conditions of parenting and family life. This duty, however, is not boundless. It does not mean that fathers must engage with every form of injustice in the world, or that feminist fatherhood entails activism on all fronts. Rather, the scope of responsibility is defined by the role itself: fathers have particular obligations regarding the structures of care, the distribution of parenting responsibilities, the workplace policies that affect parents, the economic arrangements that make caregiving more or less possible, and the cultural norms that define what fatherhood and motherhood mean.

Second, fathers are uniquely positioned to resist certain forms of injustice precisely because of their role. Their participation in caregiving, their experience of negotiating work and family life, and their intimate knowledge of the gendered division of labor within families give them a particular perspective and a particular form of credibility. When fathers speak out about the need for parental leave policies, they do so not as abstract advocates for justice but as people who directly experience the constraints of inadequate policies. When fathers challenge workplace cultures that penalize caregiving, they do so from a position of insider knowledge. This positional advantage does not mean that fathers' voices should be privileged over those of mothers or other caregivers, but it does mean that fathers have a specific contribution to make—one that emerges from their particular social location.

Third, the political engagement of fathers has distinctive effects that extend beyond the immediate policy outcomes. When fathers publicly advocate for gender justice in parenting, they model a form of masculinity that is accountable, relational, and oriented toward care. This modeling matters for several reasons: it provides visible counter-examples to hegemonic masculinity; it signals to children (and especially to sons) that

men can and should care about justice; it creates social pressure on other men to reflect on their own practices; and it contributes to the gradual transformation of what is considered normal for fathers. In this sense, the political dimension of feminist fatherhood is not only instrumental (aimed at changing policies) but also performative and symbolic (aimed at changing norms and identities).

Feminist masculinity emphasizes care, reciprocity, and justice over dominance and power, and this ethical framework can be directly applied to how fathers engage with society at large. It involves actively engaging with and challenging the societal norms and inequalities that affect parenting and family life. Fathers who embrace feminist masculinity should be allies to those whose experiences of parenthood are shaped by systemic inequalities—whether these are single parents, LGBTQ+ parents, immigrant families, or economically disadvantaged parents. These groups often face additional barriers to providing a stable and supportive environment for their children. In practice, this might involve fathers advocating for more equitable parental leave policies, supporting movements for affordable childcare, or challenging workplace cultures that make it difficult for parents, especially mothers, to balance work and family life. Fathers can also play an important role in breaking down gender stereotypes within their own families and communities, challenging the idea that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility and modeling a more equal division of labor at home. Additionally, fathers who embrace feminist masculinity should recognize the importance of intersectionality in their approach to fatherhood and social justice. Different parents face different challenges based on their race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation, among other factors (Seward and Stanley-Stevens 2014). Fathers who are committed to justice must be mindful of how these intersecting identities shape the experiences of parenthood, and they have a particular responsibility to challenge those inequalities that intersect with the gendered structures of care. This does not mean that fathers must become activists on every issue related to race, class, or sexuality, but it does mean recognizing that the structures of gender inequality they seek to resist are intertwined with other systems of oppression, and that effective feminist politics must be intersectional.

What distinguishes the political responsibility of fathers from that of other feminist allies is precisely their situated perspective as fathers and their particular implication in structures of care and power. Their lived experience of navigating parenting, their direct encounter with the gendered distribution of care labor, and their potential complicity in perpetuating or resisting patriarchal family structures position them uniquely to contribute to feminist transformation in this domain. This is not a matter of fathers having superior insight, but rather of their occupying a specific social location that makes certain forms of injustice visible and certain forms of resistance possible. It is important to emphasize what fathers, in their role as fathers, can contribute here—something other men and women cannot. Certainly, everyone is called upon to engage in societal change in this regard, but what fathers bring to the table is, on the one hand, their personal experience and perspective as fathers, which makes them more aware of certain forms of gender inequality. Public advocacy is also important because it has an impact on the private sphere of childcare and partnership. It makes a difference to children—at least from a certain age—and to partners and mothers if they see that their father or partner is actively campaigning for change. By doing so, fathers also acknowledge that their family life is not merely a private matter, but that structures and social norms—often unjust—reach into private life, affecting both their children and mothers.

Thus, while feminist fatherhood demands significant political engagement, this engagement is not boundless. It is oriented specifically toward those injustices and structural inequalities that shape the conditions of fatherhood, parenting, and gender relations more broadly. The political responsibility of feminist fatherhood is not a general responsibility to oppose all forms of injustice (though fathers, like all people, may have such general responsibilities). Rather, it is a specific responsibility that emerges from the role of fatherhood itself—from the privileges fathers enjoy, from their positioning within structures of care and power, and from their capacity to model alternative forms of masculinity. In this sense, feminist fatherhood does not entail solidarity with all good causes, but it does entail a sustained commitment to transforming the gendered structures that make feminist fatherhood necessary in the first place. This role-specific understanding of political responsibility has also been defended by Robin Zheng (2018). According to her “Role-Ideal Model,” individuals are responsible for opposing and engaging with structural injustice in accordance with the social roles they occupy, such as those of parents, workers, or citizens. Social roles both limit individual agency and provide specific possibilities and opportunities for action. This applies also to fathers. As fathers, they cannot do everything, but they can do certain things that non-fathers cannot do, both in the private and in the public sphere. The fact that fathers usually occupy additional roles—for example as teachers, managers, citizens, or politicians—can then generate further responsibilities, but may also impose additional constraints on their capacity to act. Applied to fatherhood, Zheng’s approach helps to explain why feminist fatherhood is political without implying an obligation to engage in every progressive cause. Rather, fathers bear particular political responsibilities insofar as they occupy a social role that is embedded in gendered structures of care and power.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has outlined a framework for a feminist ethics of fatherhood, emphasizing the importance of rethinking traditional gender roles and masculinity in heterosexual partnerships. It has argued that fatherhood, when viewed through a feminist lens, becomes a role that is not only compatible with care, equality, and justice but also essential to fostering more equitable and supportive family structures. By embracing feminist masculinity, fathers can break free from rigid, patriarchal expectations that limit their emotional availability and active participation in caregiving. However, this is not without its challenges, and the full realization of this vision requires ongoing personal reflection and societal change.

In this paper, far-reaching demands are placed on fathers that extend beyond their direct responsibilities as caregivers to their children and partners. The political dimension of feminist fatherhood adds another layer of complexity, requiring fathers to engage publicly for structural change. Yet these demands, while ambitious, are neither arbitrary nor unlimited. They arise specifically from the role of fatherhood itself and from fathers’ particular positioning within gendered structures of power and care. The scope of responsibility is bounded by this role: feminist fatherhood calls fathers to address those injustices and inequalities that directly shape the conditions of parenting, family life, and gender relations, rather than demanding engagement with every progressive cause. This specificity is important, for it grounds the political dimension of feminist fatherhood in the concrete realities of fathers’ lives and in the structural

advantages they enjoy, rather than treating political engagement as an abstract ideal disconnected from lived experience. This raises the question of whether fathers can actually meet these demands. Of course, fathers vary in terms of resources, privileges, and social status (Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky 2021). Accordingly, these ethical demands should be calibrated to fathers' circumstances without setting the bar too low. In light of the ethical debate between ideal and non-ideal theory (Valentini 2012), it can be said that feminist fatherhood aims both to be genuinely implementable—even under non-ideal, patriarchal conditions—and also carries within it an ideal, utopian dimension. Feminist fatherhood is indeed demanding and challenging—much like being good parents to one's children or committing oneself to other worthy goals such as justice or peace. That said, with a view to the patriarchal dividend and the privileges all men enjoy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), all fathers share a certain level of responsibility, also with respect to social change, and without going into detail here one can refer to Iris Marion Young (2011) to illustrate different ways of assigning responsibility, leading to varying degrees of accountability: those fathers who can do more, who contribute more to maintaining gender inequality, or who benefit more from it more, also bear a greater share of responsibility.

While the concept of feminist masculinity offers a compelling vision for redefined fatherhood, this paper does not fully address how deeply ingrained social structures, economic constraints, and cultural expectations might hinder fathers from adopting these practices in their everyday lives. The realities of economic pressures, particularly in single-income households or low-income families, can prevent fathers from taking a more active role in caregiving, despite their intentions. Anna Tarrant (2021) illustrates this powerfully in her study on fatherhood and poverty. These fathers would like to be more involved, but they cannot, because the economic pressure is too great — and they suffer as a result. This opens up a perspective on an injustice that cannot be fully explored within the scope of this paper. Just as it is unjust for women to be hindered by norms, practices, and structures from achieving economic equality and to be pushed into the private sphere of the family, it is likewise unjust that men often do not have the opportunity to be involved fathers, and that it is made difficult for them to practice a feminist form of fatherhood. This is not to say that these two forms of injustice weigh equally, or that fathers, as men, do not simultaneously enjoy advantages and privileges granted to them by patriarchy—they do. Still, it is unjust that they too suffer under certain norms, experience pressure, and are forced into roles they do not want to take on—roles that ultimately also dominate and oppress them. They, too, are not fully free, even if they enjoy greater freedoms than their female partners.

Moreover, the paper primarily addresses fatherhood within heterosexual partnerships, where co-parenting with a mother is the central focus. This lens excludes other family structures that are increasingly prevalent in modern society, such as single-parent households, same-sex parenting, or extended family caregiving arrangements. A comprehensive feminist ethics of fatherhood would need to consider how these different family models can also benefit from feminist principles and how fathers in non-traditional arrangements can navigate their roles in ways that foster justice, care, and equality. By broadening the scope of analysis, future reflections on this topic could include an intersectional approach, examining how race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors intersect with gender to shape the experiences and challenges of fatherhood. Fathers in marginalized communities may face unique obstacles that require different strategies and solutions for achieving the ideals of feminist fatherhood.

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