**Men in Early Childhood Education and Care: On navigating a gendered terrain**

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**Abstract**

Globally, the underrepresentation of men in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce is ongoing and has been largely attributed to the construction of ECEC as 'women's work'. Men's involvement in ECEC can help to deconstruct the feminisation of work and the gender binaries through which occupations are structured. Further to this there is a need to dismantle reinforced gendered ideologies that work towards interrogating rather than supporting the presence of men in ECEC. This paper draws on selected findings from an international research project investigating men's involvement in ECEC. It uncovers how a group of men navigate themselves within a highly gendered ECEC terrain from which they sometimes 'dropout'. Providing nuanced understandings of how men negotiate their positions in ECEC can inform intervention strategies to increase and support men's participation in ECEC in more progressive and gender sensitive ways.

**Keywords**

**Introduction**

Globally it is estimated that between two and three percent of teachers in ECEC are men (OECD 2018; Brody et al. 2021). Questions about why men avoid working in ECEC concern gender and sexuality (Warin 2018). Alongside gender and sexuality, powerful social and economic processes shape constructions of masculinity based on the avoidance of care and the feminisation of ECEC as 'women's work (Brody 2014; Xu, Warin, and Robb 2020). Beyond this conceptualisation, focusing solely on the recruitment of men to diversify the ECEC workforce has been critiqued as it is based upon a restrictive male/female gender binary that disregards gender identities falling outside a gender binary (Mohandas 2021). In taking this into consideration the core focus of our paper is not based upon arguing that men alone can diversify the ECEC workforce, but rather that they feature as one part of the gender spectrum that can work towards this goal and relinquish its label as 'women's work'. Indeed, there is also a need to delve into the specific gendered processes that influence the gendering of the ECEC profession on a deeper and more intimate level. The problem of men's lack of involvement in ECEC is not simply remedied by increasing male presence in this sector (de Salis et al. 2019). On this note, the core aim of our paper is to investigate men's involvement in ECEC and unravel how gendered processes manifest within the ECEC profession itself as a result of gendered expectations, challenges and performances. Gender is complex and in navigating through a highly gendered ECEC terrain men can work towards dismantling or reinforcing gendered ideologies and inequalities.


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In this paper we add to global understandings of men's involvement in ECEC by drawing on selected findings from an international research project investigating men in ECEC in 12 countries[1]. More importantly our specific contribution in this paper is to outline the intimate processes involving how male power is configured in ECEC. In doing so we seek to demonstrate how these gendered processes can unfairly discriminate against men's presence in ECEC and simultaneously work towards privileging men through their presence/absence in ECEC often via a system of patriarchy that disparages women and femininity. We aim to elucidate through our findings how men's involvement in ECEC can sometimes counteract efforts to undo the gendering of the profession. Herein we demonstrate how male power is configured in ECEC via a complex array of gendered processes that ultimately shape men's involvement in ECEC. We outline how the men in our study encountered resistance towards their presence as men in ECEC which shaped some of the men's decision to 'drop out' of ECEC. Notwithstanding resistance to their presence in ECEC, men themselves actively positioned themselves within a hierarchical gendered regime based on sustaining male power and normalising masculinity. We argue that uncovering the gendered complexities involved as men navigate their positions within a highly gendered ECEC terrain is necessary if we are to work towards altering the gendered profile of ECEC and dismantle deep-rooted gendered conceptualisations that sustain uneven gender power relations and gender inequalities not only in professional spaces but also at a broader societal level.

## Men in ECEC: Uncovering gendered expectations, challenges and performances

In order to alter the gendered profile of ECEC, research increasingly recognises the need to adopt gender sensitive strategies when calling for a greater representation of men in the workforce (Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen 2015; Cruickshank 2019). Despite this recognition, a gendered regime continues to prevail in ECEC within which men are 'supported' or 'condemned'. Support for men in ECEC often involves an emphasis on their ability to act as male role models (Cruickshank et al. 2020), father figures (Wood and Brownhill 2018), strict disciplinarians and sport administrators (Burn and Pratt-Adams 2015). Each of these expectations are problematic as they work towards reinforcing gendered ideologies and preserving a normative masculine identity. The conceptualisation of men as male role models for boy's has been widely critiqued as it constructs boys as individuals whose inherent masculinity is let down by a feminised system of education (Martino and Kehler 2006). Herein the male role modelling discourse is used to repudiate women and femininity within which support for men's involvement in ECEC is established upon the reinforcement of male power by validating and affirming boy's masculinities and developing boy's to be successful within the patriarchal order (Haase 2008). The assumption that men in ECEC are needed in order to act as father figures for children with absent fathers is also critiqued as it reinforces heteronormativity and discounts diverse family structures for example families with same-sex parents (McGrath and Sinclair 2013). Additionally, gendered expectations of men in ECEC to perform within a hegemonic regulatory discourse as superior disciplinarians and sport administrators place unwarranted amounts of pressure and distress on those men who cannot or do not aspire to fulfil these roles (Harris and Barnes 2009). Once more women and femininity are repudiated in a process that undermines women in their roles as effective disciplinarians (Hjalmarsson and Löfdahl 2014) and sports administrators (Taylor et al. 2017). Men who enter ECEC threaten the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) which fuels discourses that condemn men's presence in ECEC. For example, within a professionalism

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discourse, Coutler and Greg (2008, 420) argue that "If it was natural for women to teach, if women were best suited to work with the young, then, because of this, they should be seen as rendering a service out of love and should not expect high levels of remuneration or autonomy". The professional status of ECEC is thus often devalued as a 'low status women's job' (Moosa and Bhana 2018) This condemnation of men's presence in ECEC established within a professionalism discourse is also set against the repudiation of women and femininity and the configuration of male power. Herein the construction of 'proper masculinity' in opposition to femininity is largely whittled against issues of status and power within a patriarchal regime and this has contributed to a situation wherein men's needs are considered as being unfulfilled within a highly gendered and feminised ECEC terrain (Wernersson et al. 2016). Men in ECEC encounter disparaging comments about ECEC not being intellectually challenging enough for men (Bhana and Moosa 2016), an ideology that amalgamates masculinity and intellectual strength and constructs women's as the intellectually weaker sex (Connell 1995). Further to this is the stigma that men in ECEC face for opting into a low paying job that is not considered to be an economically viable option for men who within a gendered regime are expected to project a normative masculine ideal associated with high earning power (Yang and McNair 2017). Consequently, men who enter ECEC are often ridiculed for entering what is perceived to be an improper and trivial profession that is not intellectually demanding enough for a male to pursue in order to maximise his prospects in terms of his earning and status as a man (Weaver-Hightower 2011).

On another level the undesirability of femininity in contrast to masculinity is used to stigmatise homosexual men as subordinate (Connell 1992) and works as an additional discourse that condemns men's presence in ECEC. Herein men who enter ECEC are sometimes labelled as gay in/through a homophobic discourse that repudiates femininity and undermines the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity. Questioning the motives of men who work in or aspire to work in ECEC within a discourse of suspicion is a powerful ideology that is used to condemn men's presence in ECEC. At this juncture men in ECEC are problematised as sexual predators and paedophilic threats (Cruickshank 2019). Men in ECEC demonstrate an acute self-awareness of being under surveillance as potential paedophiles and this largely shapes, regulates and limits their performances in ECEC in ways that reinforce gendered roles and perpetuate gender inequalities (Pruit 2015). Nuanced understandings of the gendered complexities that shape men's performances in ECEC are thus needed in order to work towards removing men from their present confinement within a realm of gendered expectations and challenges.

**Methodology**

This article reports on selected findings from a collaborative international research project investigating how 37 men across 12 countries[2] negotiate their career trajectories into and/or out of ECEC (Brody et al. 2021). Three in-depth individual interviews were conducted with each of the 37 participants (N=111). A mixture of in-depth self-narratives and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from two categories of men who chose to work in ECEC. The first category consisted of men who worked in ECEC but opted to leave the workplace. This category comprised of 22 of the 37 men interviewed. The remaining 15 of the men interviewed formed part of the second category and comprised of men who had stayed to work in ECEC for a minimum period of five years. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The raw data was then analysed using NVivo and a system of thematic

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coding where key concepts and categories were highlighted and consolidated into themes (Braun and Clarke 2012). These themes were modified and refined through the data analysis process. The themes that are discussed in this paper focus on dominant discursive constructs that are shared across the experiences of the 37 men in our study. While the research sites vary, our interest is to examine how dominant discourses place pressure on men to enact 'real masculinity' which works to reinforce male power and to sustain an overall gendered regime. We recognise the ways in which race, class, gender and region have effects for the ways in which masculinity is produced and we have described this elsewhere (Brody et al. 2021) but our interest in this paper is to show how an overall strategy is produced in the construction of masculinity in ECEC across countries. No claim is made here about generalisability or representativity surrounding the identified discourses. On this note, Mears (2012) has argued that while interview-based studies such as ours do not aspire to generalisability, their findings can have propositions for different settings and can create a platform for participants to share experiences and understandings, hence generating an understanding of the possibilities and limits of what people might do in similar situations, even if we cannot predict what they might do. We hope that highlighting our participants' experiences and understandings in relation to their involvement in ECEC will create a platform to compare and contrast how men in different settings or contexts react when presented with similar situations. In analysing our findings below, a critical men's studies approach (Connell 2003) was used to unravel how gender power relations manifest as the men in our study navigated their positions within a highly gendered ECEC terrain.


## Men in ECEC: An unorthodox presence

Although men's presence in ECEC cannot be relied upon as a sole initiative to comprehensively challenge normative constructions of gender within ECEC, increasing the presence of men in ECEC can be considered as an important and necessary step towards dismantling deep-seated constructions of ECEC as 'women's work'. Despite this, our findings reveal that the presence of men in ECEC was considered to be unorthodox. Andrew (Australia) for example noted the following:

> So it's really hard to be a guy and want to step into, because pretty much most centres you go to it's just going to be women and so you're going to feel out of place maybe or even not wanted. It's tricky…

The internal self-awareness in relation to being a man in a space exclusively being occupied by females creates uneasiness for Andrew. Andrew constructs this movement into a female-only realm as a psycho-social challenge for men and this works towards reinforcing positioning men's presence in ECEC as unorthodox. On another level the positioning of men's presence in ECEC as unorthodox shaped by broader social forces in relation to the gender binary Riaan, from South Africa for example highlighted the powerful force of biological inscriptions from family, to university and ECEC experience. He talked about his sister who was an engineer and financially more successful. Whilst women such as his sister break the glass ceiling, his family found it 'hard' to accept his career choice which was a move away from power and successful markers of masculinity. He noted his family's concerns, 'teaching is like for a lady, and you're a man, you're going to behave like a woman teaching small babies, what's wrong with you, you know?' 'What's wrong with you?' is another example of the questioning and interrogation of masculinity in mobilising a collective understanding of male power and its disassociation from the feminine. The pressure to be a 'real man' is evident in the contamination that is suggestive

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of men who earn less, who teach, who work with babies and who are expected to take on feminine values. Upholding dominant masculinity requires the subjugation of teaching as a female profession and the association with feminine qualities. At university Riaan noted, 'fear of being ridiculed by other students, your fear of being victimized as well' and at work:

> 'You teach grade three but you're a man', … and people are like so you're a man but you teach this? I'm like ja, and so they find it very odd that as a male I teach in the Foundation Phase [phase between grade 0-3].

Another respondent Andrew also highlighted how men's presence in ECEC:

> …not even for men as well. I think even for women as well I got the impression sometimes it was weird that you were a guy there. It wasn't just that men were like, "Men don't do this job." It's that women kind of felt the same way it seems sometimes as well. (Andrew, Australia).

Although men's presence in ECEC in essence attempts to challenge the normative construction of ECEC as 'women's work', it encounters institutionalised resistance that propagates men's presence in ECEC as unorthodox. This resistance is experienced by almost all men in our study, including Riann and Andrew who reveal how their presence as men in ECEC is interrogated and considered to be improper. Further to the gendered dispositions of their interrogation signified in 'you're a man but you teach this' and 'men don't do this job' demonstrates how men's unorthodox presence in ECEC is dependent upon a powerful nexus between normative constructions of masculinity and the configuration of 'a real man'. Herein the ideology inscribing men's position in ECEC as unorthodox is a dilemma that stigmatizes men as incapable based on the feminisation of ECEC as 'women's work'. Biological sex based on the dominant stereotype of men as incapable of nurturing, empathy and care is a trope used to regulate the presence of men in ECEC. If men take on positions of care and empathy they are regarded as 'tøffel'[3] masculinity and emasculated.

## Men in ECEC: The deportment of male power

Some of the men in our study navigated their position in ECEC by fortifying a masculine presence in ways that would establish male power. Tom for example had the following to say about ECEC:

> it is, unfortunately, still a women's profession, and sometimes it feels like a conspiracy ... there's talk that it's an important job, and then men start working in preschools and not much happens. And then you take away all the men again. Then, there are only women left. It's sad and I feel sorry for those who struggle and work under these conditions (Tom, Sweden).

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[3] 'Tøffel' (meaning a coward, a pussy) masculinity is a denigrated version of masculinity that is used to describe men who move away from 'real' masculinity i.e. in the context of this study men who teach in ECEC.

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Tom links the presence of men in ECEC with the conceptualisation of ECEC as an important job. In Tom's opinion ECEC has failed to meet the standards of an important job. Herein Toms construction of ECEC as a women's profession and a conspiracy is thus invested within a discourse of power whereby he implies that men have been duped into entering ECEC via its conference as an important job. Further to this his words 'take away all the men' and 'only women left' and his sympathy for those who work 'under these conditions' alludes to a professionalism discourse that covertly stigmatizes ECEC as unimportant, low level women's work.

On another level some of the men in our study used a male role modelling discourse to 'defend' or 'justify' their position as men in ECEC. Herein a male role modelling was used as a mechanism to successfully preserve a normative masculine identity whilst navigating through a feminised ECEC terrain. Marcos (USA) for example shared the following experience:

> I have to very walk a line, you know so although, what I would like to say is to men is be that example., you know, and understand the boys and be a voice to the boys

Marcos sees his role as a 'voice to boys' and as an example in a female dominated context. He added that he encourages men in ECEC and is the voice of men in 'early childhood':

> …my program did hire a man, and I was very excited about it. So I did talk to him,…and I did mention, you know, just his very presence, how important it is. And I asked him to stick with it [ECEC]

Indeed, Marcos situates role modelling in relation to essentialist versions of gender where there is an understanding of the separateness of men and boys from women and girls in ECEC. He went on to add:

> I mean I want to put it bluntly, all my supervisors are women, when we go to, all the leadership at the central level is mostly women, so who's going to be the voice of men, who's going to be the voice of boys? On a real personal level. You know so it's not that I don't—I believe that woman are not, but I think it's different when coming from, you know, your own personal experience and then you see this certain thing in classrooms that affect boys, because boys are not being given the proper, I guess, lens.

Marcos reproduces male power as he argues for a boys' lens in the classroom based on sex-gender polarisation in a context where all his supervisors are women. Concern about the voice of men and boys, is situated within a gendered narrative that repudiates femininity. Moreover, this male role modelling is understood within a heteronormative framework where boys and men are consolidated and homogenously positioned as having needs based on their sex-gender categorisation. Under role modelling theory, gender is normalised, the sex-gender category is reinforced, and the same problematic and hierarchical ordering of relations is used to conceptualise boys' victimhood in ECEC. The lack of men and therefore the problem of who speaks for boys (and men) in ECEC and the failure to offer a 'proper' lens for boys. Using the same logic Herbert from Australia noted that gender was 'just a natural thing that happens'. Indeed, this logic of naturalisation, gender normalisation and the sex-gender binary is precisely why men are kept and keep themselves out of ECEC and experience constraint because of these essentialist version of gender roles and expectations. Norbert from Norway reinforces his role as a 'man' in relation to fathers and in opposition to female teachers:

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> …the fathers who come to me because I am a man, I already said that. But it's for instance the way we talk, our interests, as simple as soccer which I am interested in, which my female colleagues are not interested in at all, right.

Norbert configures his male presence in ECEC within a heteronormative masculine ideal that can offer specialised support to fathers within the context of ECEC. Further to this soccer is a masculinity confirming practice and the association that Norbert makes with men and masculinity is one that derives from conventional norms that are hierarchical and endorse male power. What we see in the role modelling, voice of boys and men and male example is the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is mobilised as innocuous and justifiable to address the female dominated environment and to ensure a lens that matches the needs of boys and men.

## Men in ECEC: Men, masculinities, and sexual danger

Men have to navigate a treacherous terrain (whilst actively producing it) as they either struggle to fit in or willingly present an image required by organisational cultures that place men in a powerful role. Men are thus not simply victims in this process as we have shown thus far, but the same polemics that are used by men to navigate power and solidify their presence in ECEC within a male role model discourse also serves to regulate and police masculinity and ultimately make it difficult for them to remain in the profession. Men who perform hegemonic versions of masculinity and as 'proper' men for example face further regulation which are deeply embedded in the context of ECEC as Sven (Sweden) notes:

> It became evident already during the first work placement in the activity-oriented part of the education, about 10 weeks into the education. The teachers at the pre-school were clear that I should present an image and explain who I am so the parents would not start asking about who this guy is that is hanging around. Then I wondered why it was so important that I was very clear about it. I realised it might seem suspicious that I was there, and that it would not have been the same if I had been a girl and been 165 cm tall and looked a bit cute. I am 190 cm, which makes me much bigger. Parents may feel a bigger threat when a tall guy is there.

The embodiment of masculinity in relation to sex, gender, and bodily outlook is at play here as Sven articulates the 'men as threatening' discourse in ECEC. As we have noted the gendered expectations are not individualised but instead institutionalised as they reach into and are embedded in organizations and the socially constructed ideas that parents, teachers and men themselves bring to ECEC. Parental regulation increased the microscopic gendered gaze as men's very embodiment of masculinity heightened the fear and assumed threat that accompanied stereotypes about manhood. It is difficult to fit into parental images about appropriate teachers when Sven is 190 cm and a tall man who invokes suspicion and fear in parents. Sven went on to add the following:

> At the same time, there were major differences. We were very few men, and I began to wonder why that is so. I got a little worried because I heard from several people that men have been accused in recent years and that it is almost always men who are charged with child sexual abuse or violence

Similarly, Tom (Sweden) noted

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> When I left, I had three friends working in preschools. One left because he felt it wasn't worth it anymore. He was too worried about having his own children and then being charged with child sexual abuse. The other two were accused of child sexual abuse. Both left. It was horrible. Trial and all ... they were both acquitted, but it was hard to see how they were affected by it all. I'd already left by then, but it was tough to watch. I could understand the feeling of suddenly not daring to pick up a child. If a child falls ... no, then they have to get up. You can hold my hand, but I dare not lift you up in my arms. It doesn't work. I saw how the entire workplace was broken down.

The sex-gender binary is powerful even as we have shown that it is malleable as normative constructions of masculinity have effects for what is possible for men to practice in ECEC. The notion of sexual suspicion reinforces the gender binary and underscores the formidable challenge that men face and of changing understandings of masculinity that permits its fluid and changing expressions. Sexual suspicion and allegations of being molesters make it difficult for men to stay in ECEC as Tom (Sweden) states:

> There are still people in our generation who accuse other men from our generation of sexual abuse…Unfortunately, I would not recommend any men to start working in preschools with the experiences I have had.

In relation to the male paedophilic threat in ECEC, Tom demonstrates an increasing self-awareness concerning a need to subdue the way in which he offers comfort, care and nurturance to young children. On another level, some men opted to negate childcare work again via a male power dynamic but from a different angle and this is discussed in our final finding below.

**Men in ECEC: Negating childcare work**

Some of the men in our study invested in distancing strategies from ECEC by negating their involvement in more intimate forms of caring and childcare work. Herein the construction of childcare work as women's work places pressure on masculinity and contributes to men dropping out of ECEC. Senzo (South Africa) for example brought attention to gender polarisation through distancing from nappy changing as women's work:

> …it did come to my mind that no, no, no, I can't be changing nappies nappies, …sometimes we have this mentality that um changing nappies is a woman's job…I said no, no ,no, I stopped.

Similarly, Andrew (Australia) reproduced distance from children and care through nappy changing and the discomfort he felt with babies:

> …There was definitely a few times when people are like, "Well, you don't have to change nappies." I wasn't really comfortable or confident with the babies as well.

The normative constructions of gender based on nappy changing as women's work continues to place stress upon men and masculinity as they confront a broader system of gender power relations through which their identities are assaulted as not 'real' men and emasculated. The underlying problem is the ways in which gender and masculinity are produced at the individual, institutional and broader systemic conditions which continue to place value on men as dominant. Since care work is located as women's work, caring for children undermines masculinity. Senzo (South Africa) noted:

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> Children crying, trying to keep them quiet, you had to nurse those children…it was not
> in me,…after that I told them that I'm leaving, that I can't stand this. So you see, I think
> the peer pressure that already, or the comments that were already in my mind....

Senzo highlights the entanglement of masculinity norms, peer pressure and the tension and insecurity felt in taking care of children. The avoidance of care work and dropping out of ECEC was socially constructed. Avoiding emasculation was key to the decision to step out of the field. The difficulty of being a man in negotiating masculinity which is subordinated is captured here as Nicolay (Norway) indicates that the 'there's a reason that men don't, you know, that they don't choose that profession, because, as I've said, we might become a little more like "phew, I can't bear that".' In these narratives, gender, masculinity and the incompatibility of men with ECEC is reinforced. This strategy is premised upon, and driven by, gendered ideologies and sex-role categorisation which proscribes men as carers. The distancing from children is entangled within a professionalism discourse within which a low status is often accorded to caring professions such as ECEC and this discourse is emphasised by Tom (Sweden) who revealed, 'It's still a low-wage profession, but everyone pretends it's important. Then, you should make it important'.

**Discussion**

Despite men's involvement and presence in ECEC as an important and necessary step towards altering the gendered profile of ECEC as 'women's work', gendered disparities continue to manifest even within men's presence in ECEC. Our findings demonstrate how various gendered discourses are produced as men navigate their presence within a highly gendered ECEC terrain. On this note, our findings are not generalisable nor are they country specific. Instead the aim of our paper is to show how dominant constructions of masculinity are configured among men in ECEC across different countries. Firstly, we found that men's presence in ECEC was problematised as being unorthodox both at an individual level by men who work in ECEC and at a broader institutionalised level. The predominance of women in ECEC underscored by a gender binary, stimulated a level of self-discomfort in men within which they felt out of place and unwanted. At a broader institutionalised level, the configuration of a 'real man' within a normative masculine ideal was used by family, fellow university students, colleagues, and parents to reinforce men's presence as unorthodox. This involved a process of interrogating the presence of men in ECEC using disparaging undertones. Further, men's presence in ECEC was stigmatised by questioning men's ability to teach young children in ECEC. Herein the stigma attached to men as incapable teachers in ECEC can be understood to stem from the feminisation of ECEC as 'women's work' and essentialised gendered ideologies that biologically construct men as incapable of nurturance, empathy or care (Connell 1995). Notably various gendered discourses work in powerful ways to sustain men's presence in ECEC as unorthodox. These extend from the discernible predominance of women in ECEC to more complex underlying gendered discourses that work towards sustaining and reinforcing a hierarchical gendered regime. The need to destabilise ideologies reinforcing men in ECEC as an unorthodox presence is crucial to dissolving the normalisation of ECEC as a 'woman's job' and this we argue needs to involve a process that extends beyond a gender binary to offer equal support to and value the presence ECEC workers across the gender spectrum (Mohandas 2021). More importantly, destabilising the conceptualisation of men's presence in ECEC as unorthodox can potentially play a role in lowering men's inclination to 'justify', 'defend' or 'validate' their presence in ECEC.

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Some of the ways in which men justify, defend and validate their presence in ECEC was highlighted in our second finding that outlined how men rely on male power to navigate towards an 'acceptable' presence in ECEC. The accentuation of male power in ECEC was found to be problematic as it reinforced a system of patriarchy by blurring the following two globally dominant conceptualisations of ECEC: 'ECEC as unimportant work' and 'ECEC as women's work'. Herein is a complex process of power within a professionalism discourse as men felt 'defeated' because their presence in ECEC did little to erase the former two conceptualisations of ECEC. This jeopardises the value we attach to care work and ECEC and works to actively keep men out of ECEC via a process of sustaining male power and disparaging women and care work. The male role model discourse was another mechanism used to reinforce male power by being a voice for boys and men in the context of the highly feminised ECEC. This idea of men as role models and speaking for and on behalf of boys and men in ECEC has been critiqued because of the project of re-masculinisation (Martino 2008). Boys are seen to be victims of a female dominated environment without any interrogation of power and the broader gendered dynamics through which ECEC is constituted as women's work. As Martino (2008) suggests the male role theory, fails to understand how hegemonic masculinity is positioned within the call to be an example or the voice of boys and men, as demonstrated in our findings. Male role modelling in ECEC is hinged upon the sex-gender binary and common-sense assumptions about gender, based on the problems' boys experience because of the feminisation of ECEC and driven by the need for "sex role identification as a panacea" for addressing the problems boys and men experience in ECEC (Martino 2008, 193). Whilst some scholars (for instance, Peeters 2007) argue that keeping men in ECEC will mean addressing work specific activities such as men prioritising outdoor activities (e.g. soccer as demonstrated in our findings), such practices serve to shore up enduring patterns of inequalities, within a system of power through which men and women are polarised, constructed within hierarchies and in the interests of male power. Another facet of the male role modelling discourse as demonstrated in our findings is the heteronormative conceptualisation that men in ECEC can offer specialised support to fathers. This rigid heteronormative conceptualisation is problematic as it discounts the existence of diverse family structures including families with same-sex parents (McGrath and Sinclair 2013). Inciting men to stay in ECEC by relying on a male role modelling discourse premised upon normative masculine ideals preserves the narrative of keeping men in to do the work of gender normalisation rather than social justice. The question of how the role model status is mobilised in ECEC as demonstrated in our findings, are vital in order to design strategies to actively dismantle the reinforcement of uncritical male role model discourses that preserve gender normative masculine ideals.

In our third finding, we outlined how the men as a sexual danger discourse is used to homogenously position men as paedophilic threats in ECEC, pressuring them to 'drop out' of ECEC. The male paedophilic threat in ECEC has been widely criticised as it can work towards keeping honest men who are committed to promoting gender equality away from caring professions, a practice that works to sustain male supremacy and power at a broader societal level (Wernersson 2016). We demonstrate in our findings how male power in ECEC is a complex and twofold process i.e. the same male power that is used to 'defend' and 'justify' men's presence in ECEC in our prior findings is also used as a mechanism to condemn their presence in ECEC. On this note we argue that there is a need to interrogate practices that reinforce male power, using a multi-dimensional approach that considers how the configuration of male power shaped by individual practices of men in ECEC and broader institutionalised dynamics can 'support' and equally 'condemn' men's presence in ECEC. The final theme in our findings also draws attention to the interplay of uneven gender power relations, within a

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practice whereby men in ECEC negate childcare responsibilities, ultimately opting out of ECEC. Care work is often unrewarded and regarded as inferior and women's work globally (Warin 2018). As Warin and Gannerud (2014, 20) opine: "Care-giving work that women and other less advantaged groups of people are engaged in frequently goes unnoticed, and is consistently undervalued or devalued in terms of material rewards and status". Herein the men relied on this conceptualisation of care work to devalue the professional status of ECEC and to distance themselves from ECEC and its investment in roles of nurture and intimate childcare responsibilities by dropping out; and/or to systematically reinforce male power by upholding a normative masculine identity when working in ECEC.

The gendered complexities influencing how men negotiate their presence against the configuration of male power in a highly gendered ECEC terrain that have been highlighted in this article are not separate from but weave through various process involving interrelations between women, femininity, childcare work and masculinity. These interrelations are key to the sustenance of hegemonic masculinity and a gendered regime based upon a system of patriarchy. Indeed, gender sensitive training for those working in or aspiring to work in ECEC is a much needed and welcomed intervention strategy to work towards dismantling and uprooting existing gender disparities in ECEC (Rohrmann 2020). More importantly there is a need to pave the way for the development of alternative forms of masculinity by validating the teaching of and caring for young children as a natural professional choice for men (Wernersson et al. 2016).

In this paper and based on our findings we argue towards a more sophisticated approach towards altering the gendered profiling of ECEC. We propose that intervention strategies use a bottom-up approach to interject practices that sustain the gendering of ECEC. This will involve a process of working with individuals in specific ECEC contexts to firstly ascertain and understand their specific gendered practices and complexities and then empower those individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to critically question how their gendered practices contribute to social and gendered injustices within ECEC and at a broader societal level. This process can potentially contribute not only towards reconfiguring the current gender profile of ECEC in specific contexts but also towards the eventual development of a new form of the gender order that could influence peaceful social developments on a global scale (Wernersson 2016).

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