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UNSUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONS OF MEN

**TRANSNATIONAL DISPERSED CENTRES, GENDER
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14 Men and masculinities *offside?*

The [un]sustainability of the power of men¹

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This chapter analyses the relevance and appropriateness of the idea that men and masculinities can get or be 'offside'. The topic is inspired by the recurring public and academic debates on discrimination against men and the under-representation of men as a category of analysis in sociological research. The empirical evidence used in this chapter comes from the Czech Republic, a member state of the European Union on the one hand, but a post-communist country on the other. Thus, this location is particularly useful for conceptualizing the (un)sustainability of the power of men in view of its semiperipheral character and perhaps specific transnational patriarchal context or absence (Blagojević 2013; Hughson Blagojević 2017).

Reflexivity towards gender inequalities is still rather low in the Czech Republic generally. I have previously described this as 'Domination and Silences' (Šmídová 2006), and this characterization is even more applicable for centres of power used and occupied by Czech men for the legitimization of the status quo in gender relations. The powerful institutions of men, the dispersed centres in terms of transnational and otherwise global or universal character of masculine privilege, are reconsidered here in the light of the paradox of this structural dominance of men and hegemonic masculinity perceived by some individual men as situating them *offside*.

However, the main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how men maintain their key position, what mechanisms put them 'offside', and how and where they can challenge mainstream dominant masculinity. This involves consideration of where men are located in the Czech setting and whether they are inspired or linked to transnational dispersed centres of power or arenas of dismantling the gendered character of such centres. Even the absence of such links or reverse direction in their (un)sustainability is worth of attention. The metaphor in the chapter title is inspired by the Czech author Karel Poláček and his humorous novel about football fans, *Men Offside* (1931) that takes a critical stance, as well as some degree of pity, towards Czech (Prague) small-mindedness, patriotism, Prague-centredness and gender stereotypes of that time. The analysis presented here spins around several social fields examined in my empirical research on men's practices where masculinity is under negotiation.

Men's privilege or burden?

The high-profile theme of men at risk, or in crisis, which is supported by statistics, comes out as an antithesis to the feminist emphasis on discrimination against women. In the Czech context, more and more common sense warnings have been appearing with the message that it is actually men who are disadvantaged. These instances are often framed by a corresponding declaration that women – through their supposed emancipation – have already reached an equal position with men in the public sphere, at least formally, while still dominating the private sphere in their families. As a result, men find themselves in the undesirable situation of the frequently contradictory expectations they have to shoulder: they have to maintain a sufficiency of conventional masculine status as breadwinners and be publicly engaged and successful, but they are also expected to show maturity by providing committed care to their children and in their relationships. Moreover, all that should be managed in the atmosphere of the dominant symbolic gender order, where at the same time, practices that are 'properly' masculine are defined against anything labelled as 'feminine' (Connell 1995; Harding 1987; Kimmel 1987). In order to succeed in the world of masculine domination, men must constantly demonstrate their masculinity, before the eyes of other men, in the form of public self-control and in their relationships with women, and they must distance themselves from everything viewed as feminine (Bourdieu 2001).

Thus, there is a reflection of a paradox that men actors are like puppets in a system that pushes most of them upwards into the public sphere, but they often do not actually feel powerful. The structural profile, where statistics demonstrate a significant prevalence of men in positions of public power and top economic positions, sometimes sharply contrasts with the individual feelings of disempowerment and inability to master one's life. How is it possible that men, who statistically hold dominant positions in society in several key respects, can at the same time confess to feeling endangered, saying that it is not they who set the rules and that they find themselves in an *offside* position. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 852) have pointed out that it is important to recognize that 'without treating privileged men as objects of pity, we should recognize that hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life'. This view in their approach to analysing men's practices and gender relations in respect to hegemonic masculinities forms an axis of my own approach to studying men in various contexts of their social lives. The association of men and power is being problematized and its sustainability questioned, in many ways even in the Czech context; however, it is men who are labelled as the endangered party, and the broader structural picture is biased accordingly. The top-down emancipation of women during the Soviet era is still used as proof of an absence of attention paid to men.

In this chapter I present some of the mechanisms (social, cultural, historical) that maintain a social order that – in a very specific and typical way – favours and penalizes actors in specific social institutions and contexts. At the same time, it conceptualizes what mechanisms work in setting down who becomes or remains the hero, who is to blame for turbulences in gender relations, and which of them are interpreted by the key actors as desirable and undesirable. Gender relations, it seems, are to a large extent related to the opportunity of choice, to the freedom to choose among the socially required and accepted gender identities or to be able to step outside these expectations. In this respect, the amount of room for manoeuvre also tends to have strong gender connotations; institutionally and symbolically constructed rules of the social structure interplay with individual actions. Last but not least, this chapter seeks to contribute to the study of what makes hegemonic masculinity sustainable, and what may dismantle its ubiquitous power. The global character or transnational legitimization of men in power based on associations with professional status and access to expert knowledge, transnational movements or even joint ventures in gender equality meet local practices and potentials for sustaining or challenging the status quo. Researchers who have analysed issues particularly focusing on men and masculinities from the critical sociological perspective in the Czech context, suggest that the structural situation of men under the communist regime was weaker in comparison to the capitalist contexts (Havelková 1997; Šiklová 1996; Vodochodský 2008). Thus, an issue of masculinities offside would be relevant to that period, as well as to its impact on current practices.

The chapter draws on my own research studies on environmental protection and ecological education, fatherhood, men as caregivers in families, and men at childbirth. The theme of childbirth is further approached from the perspective of health professionals as the practices of male consultant doctors are analysed. These empirical cases are summarized with emphasis on how the existing hegemonic definitions of masculinity are maintained, modified or challenged. It systematizes the relevant answers to the question of whether men and masculinity (especially) in the Czech social context are (getting) offside, with their institutions unsustainable and transnational patriarchies dismantled in this contested territory of the semiperiphery. The answer is at least twofold.

As Hearn (2004: 52) and others observed, the vast majority of men take masculine domination in society for granted and, with the consent of some women, they help maintain patriarchal power relations. It is important to realize that the strongest defenders of the cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity may not be the most powerful individual actors, yet they still work in overall harmony with other key social characteristics, such as class or ethnicity, to 'authorize' the hegemonic masculinity of the ruling group (Connell 1995: 76–81). Masculinity is a dynamic concept that works through constant monitoring and reinforcement (Carrigan et al. 1985). It operates by positing authoritative symbols to which men are to aspire.

At the same time, research needs to be done on the structural contexts of the practices and representation of hegemonic masculinity, as well as its embodiment (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846–853) and the rooting of social structures in men's bodies (somatization) (Bourdieu 2001). The male body surely plays a role in the symbols of the approved masculinity, acknowledged prestige, and in the establishment of men's reputations within their peer groups (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 851). The body, and its attributed and proven capacities, plays a structuring role in the performance of professionally demanding activities and in adrenaline-ridden situations, such as medical operations for doctors, in work regimes at or near the boundaries of the physical capability of the human body, when working on the edges of life and death (*ibid.*). The privileges of dominant men, constantly being reconstituted according to lifestyle, or in relation to expensive modern technologies, are being invented specifically with the intention of serving and contributing to the enhancement of the physical sources of strength belonging to the bodies of elite men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 851–852). Similarly, emotions and their adequate display are getting more critical analytical attention, as both a normalizing praxis and an anticipation of change connected to gender-equal policies. As de Boise and Hearn (2017) point out, however, careful attention to stereotypes is necessary in the interpretation of emotions – or their lack – associated with men.

Researching masculinities offside in the Czech context

In this sense, the patterns of negotiation or expressions of the recognition of masculine domination take place without major differences in the cultural context of the Czech environment or elsewhere. However, it is the ambivalence of the semiperipheral character of the Czech Republic (Blagojević 2013), grounded in its experience as a totalitarian country for half of the twentieth century, and as a member of the EU since 2004 being reintegrated into democratic traditions, that needs more analytical and nuanced attention. Some practices and institutions of men might have more (un)sustainable character than the stereotype of such countries (whatever it might be) would indicate. Thus, it opens a question of transnational patriarchies, colonialist frameworks and critical reflection of 'third ways' – a colloquial phrase used by Czech politicians for finding in their view original – often messy and unprofessional – solutions to standard problems in governing the country.

Some reflection is needed in reconsidering the complicit and marginalized as well as the subordinated (Connell 1995) character of Czech masculinities on the one hand, and also their subversive or progressive, aspirational character (Howson 2006, 2009). Howson assumes that hegemony is also a concept which may bring a positive change to the existing patriarchal domination; this analytical perspective will be repeatedly employed in this study. The empirical evidence shown below indicates an ambition to subvert the current hegemonic form and the text points out where complexities are re/produced. Contexts of

powerful men who frame their everyday experience in terms suggesting it is far from satisfactory will be explored together with the issue of the (un)sustainable and bifurcated transnational character of settings and men's practices in the Czech context. It is not a typology of masculinities to be formulated or contraposed one to another; rather I want to point out contexts that help us understand and differentiate practices that may seem familiar in a colonialist framework or how exotic differences may be re-interpreted by adding a common denominator. To draw on concepts introduced by Hearn and Blagojević (2013: 9) such a metamorphosing of transnational differences and a revision of preconceptions around neutral (Western, globally Northern) and biased semiperipheral (Southern, Eastern, other) centres of authority, knowledge and power may help us reconfigure – or transfigure – the mutual relationships of the unsustainable institutions of men.

The Czech context could be approached and characterized in many ways. I will make several references now to apt and timely titles relevant for the topic of this chapter. Václav Havel, playwright and the country's first post-1989 president, wrote about the 'The Power of the Powerless', the strength in civil disobedience during the communist times and parallel structures of 'disidents' – these parallel structures of power 'centres' have influenced our understanding of the official politics as opposed to the real lives of people (Havel 1990). These parallel structures maintain a certain significance in the organisation of everyday practice even nowadays. Ivo Možný, the sociologist and founder of the Faculty of Social Studies in Brno after 1989, published a sociological essay 'Why So Easy: Some Family Reasons for the Velvet Revolution' (Možný 1991). This explained the unreflected readiness of the regime to break down in 1989, how household 'fortresses' provided safe spaces for people to talk freely despite restrictions and fears experienced in the public domain before 1989, and also the swift Bourdieuan transformations of capital immediately after 1989. In the latter process the accumulated political, social and economic capital of the conforming elites was channelled into powerful positions in the new regime. These were kept invisible and silent for some time (an issue of shame was at stake there, too) but are now penetrating and infiltrating the public, economic and political realm, fuelled by the nostalgia of 'ordinary Czech people' striving for easy (and populist) solutions. The topic of nationalism and the role of ordinary people was taken up by Ladislav Holy (Holy 2010) in *Little Czech Man*² and *The Great Czech Nation: National Identity and Post-Communist Transformation of Society*. He has targeted the ambivalence or paradox of pettiness, amateurism and calculation as a significant trait of Czech 'third ways' (a nation of the Kafkaesque and Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*) and nationalist tendencies and reminiscences of a great past, including idealization of the democratic period between the world wars.

State policy before 1989 mandated women's emancipation and encouraged the blurring of gender differences in the workplace. However, the fact that we today continue to assign men to leading work positions while women are to

care for children and the household, suggests that the patriarchal gender ideology was never completely disassembled and that it has a strong momentum. As opposed to the former state policy of emancipating women and blurring gender differences, the 'natural' dual role of women and men is being reinvented, emphasized and reinforced to some extent. Stress is placed on the biological nature of motherhood and the presumably instinctive female care. With such conceptualization, women's sexuality and (in the language of medical authorities) women's hormonal imbalance turns women into irrational beings who are in no condition to be making decisions, not even about their own bodies (for example when the life of a child is at stake at birth). Calls by Czech women to transform this practice are twisted into allegedly hysterical expressions of irresponsible and uninformed, risk-taking actors. Such a context illustrates different trends in cultivating gender debates in the long run and situates the Czech Republic, together with some other countries, differently in the recent populist, far-right, xenophobic and anti-gender initiatives and their civic or political counter-positions. Local specificities and resemblances with more transnational issues and institutions of men, the semiperipheral – postcolonial – offside relation will be now illustrated in several empirical cases.

What unites and at the same time distinguishes men protecting nature (in my doctoral research) or men – consultant doctors – in maternity wards? What similarities can be found between the changing practices of men and embodiment of masculinities in the Czech family, whether they concern nurturing fathers' status, or the normative expectations of accompanying one's partner during childbirth?

Masculinities offside in environmental protection

The recurring theme in my analyses is the ambivalent relationship between the crisis and the dominance of today's men, as well as the institutionalized and symbolic dominance of current forms of masculinity. Back in the late 1990s, in my doctoral research, I touched upon a similar tension. Then, I followed the ongoing careers of men in professions associated with ecological education and environmental protection who were also active fathers. It must be pointed out that they were men in leading professional and otherwise influential posts in a newly emerged legitimate area of professional specialization, however marginalized such an area has been (Šmidová 2004). The analysis focused on their sensitivity and responsiveness to the problems of the 'weaker', taken as representatives of practices deviating from the conventional notions of mainstream masculinity. I pondered upon whether these men represent a 'new' socially desirable practice, focusing on the care and protection of a 'defenceless' nature, which also in other cultural contexts metaphorically involves disrupting the patriarchal model of masculine domination in human interactions. Connell (1990) discovered clear alliances between young men engaged in environmental movements in Australia and human rights campaigners, including the women's movement. However, I had to

conclude the analysis in the Czech cultural context with a discussion of the patterns enhancing the reproduction of the gender order, asking whether the presented professional orientation and careers of the communication partners have brought any shift in gender relations. I finally inclined to the notion that those men were a new/old version of patriarchs rather than men newly defining the power balance between men and women. In the case of their careers, these men remained stuck with the hierarchical relation between the 'lords of creation' and conservation (Šmídová 2004).

As my doctoral research stated (Šmídová 2004: 149–150): Should the protective and protecting men, engaged in rethinking the dominance of humankind over nature, take account of gender relations, they would have to consider hierarchy in human relationships as well. However, this does not only concern the First World's hegemony over the Third World, which is already being discussed along with environmental issues, but they would also have to consider and reconsider the relations between masculinities and femininities, and include them in their 'fight for the good thing'. Connell (1990) shows, in researching men in the environmental movement, that a redefinition of masculinity in this area takes place only if the men reflect on the nature of the power and superiority of men as a group over women (and a certain group of men over all the others), in addition to dominance over the weaker nature. This dimension would force them to rethink their own (masculine) concept of public protection of the weaker and the (feminine) private care.

Not even as teachers of environmental education or fathers have these men stepped out of the conventional gender arrangements in these social fields. They epitomized the active and universalistic masculinity (taking their children to the countryside, showing them the world), and by doing so they reproduced and maintained the status quo of polar conservative expectations related to women's and men's social identities. Yet, these men have transgressed the rules of conventional masculinity in several respects and it cannot be clearly concluded that they merely reproduce the status quo in gender relations, and that they represent hegemonic masculinities (and not the outsiders offside). They were quite outspoken about the inequalities and admitted their share of responsibility for them, but also a certain degree of indolence in respect to changes in their own practice. Thus they realized the benefits of the status quo, which they regarded as problematic in a number of respects, but while they fought for their beliefs concerning the protection of nature, they mostly failed to take an active role in challenging unequal gender relations.

They looked for answers available and comprehensible to them based on their understanding of the conventional gender division of society. It searches for men in order to overcome obstacles in the public (professional) realm and addresses structural failure in 'providing' them, while targeting women when issues symbolically labelled as private (associated with care) are at stake. Viewed in the transnational context, the bifurcated trajectories of Europe resulted in adopting a modified approach to environmental protection in the Czech Republic, problematizing the smoothness of the transnational translation of the green movement rooted in a fight for equality beyond human rights.

(Un)sustainable active versus caring fatherhood?

The second fieldwork project presented here concerns fathers with the status of nurturers or primary caregivers. It was conducted shortly after parental leave was made available in 2005 to fathers in the Czech Republic, and analysed the transformations of Czech fatherhood concentrating on how this change in practices had – or had not – affected the progressive trends in gender relations. Gender equality is sometimes interpreted in this context as an internationally imported idea, thus reconfiguring the idea of transnational centres of (new) institutions of men. Their status opened questions such as: do they substantiate the notion of 'masculinities offside' or do they cast doubt upon it? The men on parental leave clearly disrupt the traditional idea of the gendered division of labour. The specific everyday routine practices of the family couples that disrupt the common and symbolically clearly established notion of the family obligations attributed to women (nursing) and men (breadwinning), are sometimes in conflict with their own overall comprehension of gender relations in the family. However, the way the housework and childcare in the families researched was arranged does not indicate a simple exchange of parental social identities, where the father takes over everything that women on parental leave 'normally' do.

The family strategies of these couples offer several significant changes, including a list of specific improvements that are made available to families with conventional gender arrangements for inspiration. It may be noteworthy for the status of mothers on parental leave that the father in the same situation takes care of the children, but does not automatically assume the care of the household. It is also interesting for the status of breadwinning fathers how the exclusive motherly power over the nurturing know-how is negotiated, or how come that in a Czech two-career family the involved men are still labelled as 'helpers'. Also, in the Czech context, such family arrangements with fathers on parental leave may come out of a necessity and not as a reflexive gender project. The stereotype of mothers-as-caregivers in the families where the children were looked after by men was sometimes guarded and confirmed by the legitimacy of the mothers' 'power' in the private sphere. Such legitimate women's dominance could draw on a notion of her better qualification for certain activities, which she is only temporarily not carrying out, or on her 'patent for the know-how' with the resulting privilege to decide in some situations and make the 'correct' decision. A typical example was breast-feeding or setting limits to what was dangerous and safe for the baby. Yet, nurturing fathers help sustain or broaden arenas, where men are praised and symbolically rewarded. Media and peer pressure work to illuminate the portraits of families with men taking care of children. However, no public attention and appraisal is paid to their women partners, who at least equally contributed to this family arrangement. These mothers redefine the stereotype of 'heartless mothers' by saying that a good mother is not only the one who is on a 24/7 shift, who is available for her family and whenever necessary gives up any other activities. These

families offer at least two models of parenting, and both are stimulating for gender relations constellations. They redefine both fatherhood towards nurturing, pointing out that it is also possible, and also motherhood, which in the same spirit overcomes the burden of the double 'women's' shift. Moreover, they also offer for consideration the model of 'exchanging' the conventional parental responsibilities and point to symbolically significantly different meanings, which the same activities assume depending on whether they are performed by a person who is adequate from the gender point of view, or 'inappropriate'.

It seems that the trend towards more parental involvement by fathers is growing, and this change is presented as socially and politically welcome and desirable. In this sense, it is very important to observe whether a deflection of the equality axis of gender relations in this direction does not still tend to strengthen male privilege. As Howson (2009) discusses, active fatherhood may represent a progressive hegemony, aspiring to harmonize gender relations, and therefore it symbolically downplays the role of gender inequalities and differences between women and men. However, the author also presented his concerns that it may just amount to men's conquering another gender-specific sphere, without a parallel shift in gender practices in the public sphere. It also seems (in the spirit of Dinnerstein 1999) that gender practice changes in the private sector are perceived in terms of the hope of progressive change rather than a regression or maintaining the status quo in gender relations. There is an unquestionably intense personal engagement by these men – bodily and emotionally – in practices gendered so far as feminine. Such change in practice stimulates changes to the status quo of gendered division of labour. No matter how deeply embodied these nurturing and caring experiences get for individual men, change at the reflexive, symbolic level lags behind. The tendency to raise the profile of men actors at the first sign of their goodwill in participating more actively in family life, is apparently more general. Czech caring practices thus do not diverge from broader international trends in this respect regarding the transgression or sustainability of gender inequalities.

Medical uniforms and (un)sustainable power of medical professionals

The final empirical evidence I wish to introduce brings us to the topic of childbirth, institutionally set within hospitals, and develops a perspective on the embodied gender of health professionals. The health care system is feminized in the Czech Republic, as it is globally (Kuhlmann and Saks 2008; Riska 2012); there is also a strict gender hierarchy among the professions. Besides the horizontal segmentation, the vertical structure also has a clear gender axis. Practices of head doctors (senior consultants – men) have been analysed, while illustrating the hegemonic and off-putting contexts of their work, which reinforce their dominant position as something that condemns them personally. In their case, selective reference to 'objective' (international, transnational, evidence-based) science and expert knowledge (biomedical) is used to legitimize interventionist practices that are sometimes harmful to

women. Thus, their reference to a transnational dispersed centre of often androcentric knowledge, and the authority of medicine as a profession, consolidates the gender power imbalance.

The fieldwork in Czech maternity wards revealed exhausted men in positions of head doctors, yet they were 'bearers of the good news' for 'newborn' parents. They struggle between sticking to their prestige and rigid guidelines of the professional status, basking in the glow of late modern medicine and being trapped as 'cogs in the machinery' of the systems of organizing Czech health care and hospital routines. Some of them do advocate for systemic change, shifting the power imbalance towards a more engaged partnership with birthing women, while guided by essentializing assumptions about the career paths of their women colleagues (primarily seen as mothers/carers). Women learn to play the same game (often enforced) following these gendered rules. Exceptionally, they, women and men, do not give up fighting against the system putting them offside.

This empirical evidence as documented in topical research interviews (Šmídová 2014a, 2015b, 2015a) indicates some ambivalences of the lived dominance of men in specific Czech contexts. The situation of men in authoritative positions of the health care hierarchy – head doctors in maternity wards may seem paradoxical in particular as this is based on their structural (professional) dominance, which was perceived by individual actors as limiting and unsatisfactory. Two parallel trends can be noted: first, that power is structured and centralized in a few decision-making bodies in the medical profession, where the power centre plays a core role. So Prague, as a location of political, as well as economic, capital has a very specific position. Thus centrality brings advantages gained according to the proximity and compliance with the top-down hierarchy of the decision-making authorities (university clinics, political decision-making centres in the capital versus regional small-scale hospitals) closely linked to the political and economic (allegedly corrupt) powers. Second, the system reproducing gender inequality rests also with complicit femininities – the compliance of women doctors and predominantly middle-level hospital personnel (nurses) with the practices required in particular hospital departments. There is a lot at stake, so such a defence of the well-established patriarchal gender order in the hospital setting brings advantages to the most engaged actors. It reproduces gender injustice, though, and thus reproduces the hegemony of men in this setting.

The complex organization of hospital routine and the Czech national health care system renders head doctors disempowered. The commonplace system of coping with professional and family lives is highly gendered here, with women doctors expected to pursue their family careers rather than be involved in cutting-edge surgical practices. Moreover, the fading prestige of obstetrics, fuelled by lawsuits over fatalities, prompts men to leave for the more lucrative private sector. Men consultant doctors of maternity wards in the position of experts in managerial positions are often in a hopeless situation. As the study has documented, there are no formal regulations to make them incorporate women into their leading departmental teams. They

routinely tend to pass on their expertise to male successors. In respect of reproducing gender equality, head doctors remain in powerful positions, often enhancing rather than combating gender stereotypes that direct (even professional) women to the private sphere of family care. The overall compliance of these women with such arrangements may be as a result of long-term discouragement at work and a lack of other institutionalized options to manage both shifts as well as their personal choice. The latter option nevertheless was, I would say, considered thoroughly even before their choice of profession, so it is a rather unlikely preference. Such reproduction of the status quo in gender relations helps sustain the existing power imbalances between professional men and women and legitimizes essentializing arguments on the suitable and unsuitable positions of men and women in the social and professional hierarchy.

Moreover, the specific role of the authoritative knowledge (biomedical) and experts (centrally based physicians and officials of national specialist organizations) should be taken into account. Actors' reliance on and adherence to science and expert knowledge referred to as neutral, evidence-based medicine, is one of the points of reference used by the opposing parties in these disputes. Thus, selected international/transnational knowledge presented as universally true is used to legitimize the status quo, while other knowledge sets and segments of research evidence are neglected and their significance played down. National conferences on medical specializations sometimes serve as all-male clubs seemingly convincing themselves of that only their practices are legitimate.

Men offside? The boundaries of power (un)sustainability

References to transnational universalist truths (medical science), deviations from international environmentalist ideology (protection rather than care) and inspiration in gender sensitive policies and practices (paternal leave and nurturing fathers) refer to the issue of the sustainability and unsustainability of transnational centres of power situated in the hands of men. The empirical evidence, grounded in the context of the Czech Republic, a semiperipheral country (Hearn et al. 2013; Blagojević 2013) in the sense of traditional democracies and its geopolitical location, was used to contribute to the discussion on whether moving across or beyond transnational boundaries, metamorphosing them, creating new configurations and other processes, can bring about either a dissolution of patriarchal (and transpatriarchal) institutions of men or work towards their concentration and accumulation in new/alternative forms, as Hearn and Blagojević (2013: 9) have aptly put it.

Gender relations and their negotiations either in a private or professional setting represent a very complex topic. The practices of men and the repertoire of institutionalized masculinities reflected in the analyses here are by no means complete. Moreover, there it is no ambition of this text to resolve the complexity or provide any easy answers. The contexts and challenges of gender relations are linked to the broader social processes of individualization, globalization and the dissolution of traditional social identities, as described in contemporary sociology

(Bauman 2002; Beck 2004; Giddens 2010). I argue, along with Acker (1990), Harding (1987), West and Zimmerman (1987), Connell, and others, that they operate on several levels. Personal practice and interaction are (becoming) accommodated by institutionalized structures. And these rules and organizational arrangements are gendered in a very specific way. This principle, whether it is called patriarchy or masculine domination, is characterized by dominance of the hegemonic patterns of men's conduct and the subordination of all others. The everyday interactions of actors with the structure, the resulting 'habitus' of the actors (Bourdieu 1990), is confronted with the adequate and expected symbolic representations of masculine and feminine practice. With reference to Bourdieu's (2001) concept of inverting the causes and the consequences, such studies of men's practices illustrate these processes of the 'naturalization' of the gender order. It consists of funnelling phenomena that do not fit the dominant gender order into invisibility and striving for their interpretation within the intentions of it, and with the use of means provided by the system itself. This illustrates how transnational knowledge travels and is translated culturally rather than literally.

Thus, the protective men in environmental protection have declared their openness to debate on gender equality and with one breath they hailed women for their indispensable childcare. The pro-family men have breached the barrier of the 'women's sphere'. In this sense, the change in their caring practice extends further regarding gender equal relationships. They all work hard to keep the researcher aware that they know what is 'normal', regardless of their everyday practice, in which they may often break down this normality. And the practices of men in prestigious medical professional settings, often associated with omnipotence and the exercise of power, have only pointed to the complexity of social structures restraining individual initiative in certain respects, yet allowing for a reproduction of the status quo in the workplace with the everyday routine of men as bosses and (all) women as (at least potential) mothers.

Yet, we can keep the idea that on the level of the individual practices of the actors, there are settings where the dual gender division of labour and competencies is quite often transgressed. At the same time, these deviations are not transformed on a symbolic level to parallel or even alternative patterns of gender relations without a hitch. It seems, therefore, as stated in the theory by Harding (1987) and others, that the persistence of masculine domination is maintained precisely on the level of the symbolic order: in the ways we think and talk about the practices. The safe haven offered by our faith in known gender arrangements has not been challenged yet by 'different' biographies. Transnational knowledge, policies, movements and even practices travelling internationally are not rock-solid ice-breakers for the status quo in gender relations as it can be translated in a biased way or utilised only in a very ad hoc manner. A similar note relates, quite understandably, both to the men departing from the beaten path as well as to women. Highlighting some unambiguously gender-assigned practices served to legitimize the status quo and emphasised the validity of conventional gender relations, despite variations in their individual practices. This activity was difficult, but vital for the research participants' concept of their gender identities. The

identification of what becomes heroic and what is withheld only points to the powerful persistence of the existing gender order.

The data from the study on men head doctors nevertheless indicated that everyday practice in a highly formalized and professionalized setting does not provide or guarantee a gender neutral treatment either. A gender challenge is brought about in this setting rather by sheer despair in the recruitment of available physicians or by the individual gender-enlightened or open-mindedness of a particular personality in the head position. The masculine biographies in that setting call for a dual interpretation. They challenge the exploitative and misogynist patterns in men's practices, but they also maintain, reproduce and support conventional, mainstream approaches to gender: the protective function of masculinity or a limited form of equality in the family, where childcare is shared, but not housework.

The mechanisms that maintain and disrupt the contemporary gender order often co-occur. It is problematic to evaluate the environmentally protective men and the active fathers as positive deviations in terms of redefinitions of the hegemonic masculinities, as the issue is more complex. And at the other end of the social ladder, neither do the men doctors condemned to rule appear as straightforward examples of powerful men to be dismissed as unequivocally oppressive, because in their case the hegemonic patterns of masculinity (reproducing gender inequality) are interwoven with strict (hierarchically set) professional guidelines, vital judgements and responsibility, the current state of the national organization of health care, and the everyday routine in which complicit masculinities mingle with complicit femininities. This text has hopefully problematized easy answers to issues of men being (un)sustainably in institutions of power. There seems to be no easy way to deconstruct the dominant and transforming men's 'centres' of power despite existing practices putting men (themselves) offside or beyond the colloquial boundaries of institutions of men associated with gender power.

Notes

- 1 The chapter draws on the author's empirical studies, some of which have been previously published in greater detail in the Czech language (Šmidová 2008, 2011b) or in English (Šmidová 2009, 2011a, 2014a, 2015b). The title and several shorter segments of this text, especially towards the conclusion, utilize the unpublished habilitation thesis, 'Masculinities Offside? Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities – a Sociological Analysis' (Šmidová, 2014b).
- 2 Referring to gender-neutral person here – a human being.

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