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ABSTRACT

On arrival in the European Union, most migrants who apply for asylum stay often for extended periods of time in asylum centres, putting parenting practices under pressure. Despite an increased interest in the functioning of migrant families, the perspectives of migrant fathers remain marginalized in practice, policy, and scientific research. Very little is known about how migration impacts fathering practices and how migrant fathers may best be supported in their parental role, especially in unique parenthood contexts such as when residing in an asylum centre. This paper aims to explore migrant fathers' parental practices, experiences, and perspectives while raising their children in an asylum centre in Belgium. Semi-structured interviews with 21 fathers in asylum centres were conducted. The findings were thematically analysed. The analysis shows that staying in an asylum centre challenged fathers' ability to fulfil paternal tasks and responsibilities such as ensuring safe accommodation, providing food, fulfilling material needs, and bringing their children to school. Different coping strategies such as seeking (in)formal support and problem-solving were expressed to answer the daily challenges and resist existing reception structures. For most fathers, the roles of provider and protector were the most important. We argue that migrants' unique voices, experiences, and understandings remain left unheard in the organization and the practical implementation of asylum reception initiatives, limiting support for fathers in these institutions and hindering the enjoyment of their roles as fathers during adverse and stressful periods.

1 | Introduction

Migration, either voluntary or forced, inevitably triggers multiple challenges in people's lives, evoking emotional, social, and physical changes as well as extended adaptations in all domains of a parent's life (Merry, Pelaez, and Edwards 2017). Due to loss of social support networks, adjustments to a new cultural context, language barriers, experiences of discrimination and stigmatization, declines in socio-economic status, and reduced access to health and social services, migrant families applying for asylum may experience compounding difficulties (Bhugra 2004; Merry, Pelaez, and Edwards 2017). This puts parenting practices within migrant families under pressure.

Forced migration induces a chronic process of cumulative traumatization and a complex interplay between pre-flight and post-flight stressors (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010a; Lustig et al. 2004). This long-term adverse context potentially increases intrafamilial stress and conflict (Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery 2006) and may affect parents' capacity to provide emotionally responsive parenting practices (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010a). Throughout the migration route and

while in transit, migrant families are similarly affected by numerous environmental contexts affecting and reshaping parents' pre-existing values, ideas, and cultural practices on parenting (El-Khani et al. 2016; Slobodin and de Jong 2015; Sonderegger et al. 2011).

On arrival in the destination country, migrants who applied for asylum reside in reception centres, often for an extended period of time of several months or even years, awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim. Despite the relative safety of the destination country compared to the conflict and war-affected zones these migrants often fled from, this specific institutional context puts additional pressure on the family and may further complicate parenting (Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn 2020; Raffaetà 2016).

Previous research highlighted that daily stressors and insecure reception conditions in the destination country can be more strongly related to measures of distress than war-related events in refugee populations (Miller and Rasmussen 2010; Pfeiffer et al. 2022). A stay in an asylum centre highly impacts the emotional and social lives of residents in general (Ghorashi 2005; White 2012) and the functioning of family life in particular (Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn 2020). Characterized by regimes of control and discipline, all basic life necessities such as accommodation, eating, working, and relaxing (Vanden Houte 2017) are regulated and collectively organized within the boundaries of the asylum centre. In this way, active adult refugees are forced into reduced autonomy, resulting in low self-esteem and heightened stress levels (Keygnaert, Vettenburg, and Temmerman 2012), leaving them in a position of dependency and isolation (Ghorashi 2005) and challenging parents' ability to 'care for and nurture their children's development' (Ogbu, Brady, and Kinlen 2014, 15).

The family environment, especially during times of adversity, serves as a supportive system for all its members (El-Khani et al. 2016; Papadopoulos and Gionakis 2018). During and after migration, all family members should be given appropriate and tailored support by services (Papadopoulos and Gionakis 2018). During the last two decades, research shows an enhanced interest in the functioning of families and communities in migration (Raffaetà 2016). However, most of these studies are either child-centred—framing parents as 'moderating factors' to their children's well-being (De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren 2010b; V. Elliott 2007; Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2010; Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn 2020; Raffaetà 2016), are based on mothers' experiences and perspectives (Okeke-Ihejirika and Salami 2018) or combine accounts of migrant mothers and fathers alike (Merry, Pelaez, and Edwards 2017). In the provision of parenting support services, the main focus seems to be put on mothering (Pfitzner, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2020), marginalizing migrant men as fathers in the parenting sphere (Este and Tachble 2009). Research exclusively investigating migrant fathers' perspectives is scarce, and very little is known about how migration impacts fathering practices and how migrant fathers may best be supported in their parental role, especially in unique parenthood contexts such as an asylum centre (Williams 2010). Rather, previous research primarily drew on migration as a factor undermining fathers' capacities to protect their children (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011) and, compared to mothers, diminishing their significance in their children's lives (Dermott and Miller 2022). This research strand generates a deficit narrative, systematically emphasizing the shortcomings and challenges of migrant fathers instead of their resilience, talents, perspectives, and the unique opportunities that migration could potentially offer to this group of parents (Dermott and Miller 2022; Roer-Strier et al. 2005). Nevertheless, fathers' role during migration is of paramount importance in promoting the health and well-being of their families across the life span and during adversities (Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn 2020; Riggs et al. 2016; Sarkadi et al. 2008).

To address the dearth of research on fatherhood during migration and to inform the development and provision of supportive services and policies to support migrant fathers applying for asylum during the complex transition of migration, an exploration of their perspectives and lived experiences is of great importance. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the parental practices and experiences of migrant fathers applying for asylum while raising their children in an asylum centre in Belgium.

2 | Methodology

2.1 | Context

The minimum standards for the reception of applicants for international protection in the European Union are laid down in the European Reception Conditions Directive (2003/9/EC and 2013/33/EU recast). The open formulation of these standards results in a dispersed landscape of reception practices across the Member States (Rosenberger and König 2012; van der Horst 2004). In Belgium, the reception of applicants for international protection is coordinated by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and implemented in collaboration with non-governmental organization (NGO) partners and local authorities (Fedasil 2021). The two main types of accommodation are collective reception centres (comprising 73.2% of the capacity) on the one hand and individual housing facilities (comprising 19.6% of the capacity) on the other (Fedasil 2021).

At the end of 2021, as many as 43% of the residents in the Belgian reception network were families with children (Fedasil 2021), of which the vast majority stayed in collective asylum centres. In both, residents are provided housing, food, clothing, medical, social, and psychological support, a small daily allowance (for an adult: €7.90/week), and access to interpretation services, legal representation, education, and training (Fedasil 2022). To earn additional money, residents can perform certain community services within the asylum centre, such as cleaning communal areas or working in the kitchen (Article 34, Belgian Reception Act), for which they receive some extra money. After 4 months following their asylum application, when a decision on their asylum claim is not yet taken, asylum applicants can obtain a work permit and access the regular labour market. Yet, when a resident is professionally employed, a part of this income (from 35% to 75%) has to be given to the asylum centre (Article 35/1, Belgian Reception Act).

In the collective asylum centres, residents share sanitary and laundry facilities and leisure time areas. Depending on the

specific organization of the centre, residents can either cook for themselves or are compelled to rely upon the consumption of prepared meals in shared dining halls, three times a day, at fixed hours. In comparison with unaccompanied minors and single men and women who have to share a sleeping room with others, families with children—including single parents—are assigned private rooms in the centre (Fedasil 2022).

2.2 | Recruitment

The head office of Fedasil and the Flemish Red Cross, an NGO partner, were contacted by the researcher. Through these partners, an information letter was distributed to, respectively, 20 (Fedasil) and 2 (Flemish Red Cross) collective asylum centres under their jurisdiction. The information letter explained the aim and the methodology of the study and formally invited the asylum centre to voluntary participation in the study. Ultimately, three asylum centres agreed to participate: two large-scale centres (hosting between 300 and 500 people) and one small-scale centre (hosting between 100 and 200 people).

A criterium sampling strategy was used to recruit migrant fathers applying for asylum. The criteria included (1) being a father of at least one minor child (below the age of 18) with whom he stays in a Belgian asylum centre, (2) having stayed for at least 2 months in Belgium and (3) having resided for at least 3 weeks in an asylum centre in Belgium. Individual participants were recruited in two ways. In one asylum centre, fathers were first approached by a staff member who explained the study, after which, if they consented, the researcher contacted them. In total, two participants were recruited in this way. In two other asylum centres, after receiving a list of all fathers staying in the asylum centres, the researcher approached possible participants herself. She introduced herself as a university student who aims at conducting a study on fatherhood in asylum centres in Belgium. Upon introducing the topic, the person was invited to talk about his experiences as a father during an individual interview. As the researcher masters a basic level of the Arabic language, the study was explained in Arabic, the language of most (possible) participants. An interpreter working in the asylum centres assisted the researcher to approach possible participants in other languages (including Farsi, Dari, and Russian). In asylum centre A, 20 fathers were invited to participate in the study, of which eighteen agreed. In asylum centre B, five fathers were invited to participate, of which three agreed. Yet, one father in asylum centre A did not show up by the time of the interview and was no longer reachable. Further, one father in asylum centre B left the centre by the time of the interview and thus dropped out.

2.3 | Procedure

Given the limited research on this topic, the study was exploratory and qualitative in its approach. The researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 migrant fathers. An interview guide including reference questions and themes based on scientific literature as well as own experiences with migrant families was developed by the researcher and guided the interviews. Topics included the daily parenting routines and practices, the father–child relation, the father–mother relation, parenting norms and values, parental concerns as well as dreams and aspirations for the future.

To maximize the quality of the data and 'to ensure language would not be a barrier to self-expression' (Roer-Strier et al. 2005, 319), a certified interpreter, unknown to the father, was present during all interviews, simultaneously translating during the conversation. All interpreters, except one, were male, had a migration background themselves and shared their cultural background with the participant. Beforehand, the researcher went together with the interpreter through the interview guide to clarify interpretations and concepts and to avoid misunderstandings (Freeman 1983).

The research was conducted according to the ethical rules presented in the General Ethical Protocol of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University. Informed consent was requested and received from all participants. All participants agreed upon the audio recording of the interview. After the interview, all fathers were informed about the possibility of contacting the researcher in case they had further questions about the study or if they needed someone to talk to about the issues raised during the interview. Monetary or material incentives were not provided to the participants.

Each interview was conducted in a place the participant felt at ease (McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber 2001). Twelve fathers preferred to conduct the interview in an empty conference room of the asylum centre. Nine fathers preferred to conduct the interview in their own private room. The length of the interviews ranged from 35 to 104 min with an average duration of 65 min.

2.4 | Participants

Seventeen fathers in asylum centre A, two fathers in asylum centre B and two fathers in asylum centre C were willing to participate in the study, leading to a total sample of 21 migrant fathers applying for asylum. The age range of the fathers was between 31 and 54 years old ($M_{age} = 39.9$; $SD_{age} = 6.9$) and had stayed in the asylum centre for 1–15 months ($M_{stay} = 5.5$; $SD_{stay} = 3.4$; $Med = 7$). The fathers were from Palestine ($n = 6$), Syria ($n = 3$), Iraq ($n = 3$), Afghanistan ($n = 3$), Iran ($n = 2$), Angola ($n = 1$), the Democratic Republic of the Congo ($n = 1$), Ukraine ($n = 1$) and Sudan ($n = 1$). Most of them ($n = 16$) stayed together with their partner in the asylum centre, whereas five of them were single fathers. The fathers had between one and seven children ($M = 2.9$).

2.5 | Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed ad verbatim. First, to get acquainted with the generated data, the researcher went through the transcriptions several times. Second, the data analysis was facilitated by using the code-and-retrieve software NVivo 12 for qualitative data. Central themes and sub-themes from the initial interview guide were put forward, whereas themes and sub-themes emerging from the interviews were supplemented on this basis. This iterative process resulted in an extensive tree structure (see the Appendix) clustering–related themes and overarching concepts.

This paper presents the themes that were most common and recurrent in the fathers' accounts.

3 | Results

Shedding light on the daily practices and experiences of migrant fathers in three Belgian asylum centres revealed daily challenges, coping strategies, and personal perceptions of fatherhood. **Daily challenges** refer to the parenting tasks and responsibilities, from the perspective of migrant fathers applying for asylum, that are put under pressure when staying in a reception centre. Participants felt constrained to ensure safe accommodation for their offspring, provide food, fulfil their children's material needs, and bring them to school. The fathers in the study engaged in different **coping strategies**, actions to respond to the stressful parenting situations they found themselves in (Mak, Zimmerman, and Roberts 2021). **Support-seeking**, turning to formal and informal support sources, and **problem-solving**, adaptively finding solutions to deal with the stressors, are coping strategies that were particularly present in the fathers' accounts (Mak, Zimmerman, and Roberts 2021; Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2016). Describing paternal roles, the roles of provider and protector were cited as the most important ones by most fathers in the study.

3.1 | Paternal Tasks and Responsibilities Under Pressure

Staying in an asylum centre had an impact on fathers' ability to fulfil different paternal tasks and take up self-attributed responsibilities. Not being able to ensure safe accommodation, provide food and material needs and the practical challenges to bring their children to school were most cited by the respondents and highly present in their daily lives as fathers.

3.1.1 | Ensuring Safe Accommodation

Most fathers described the reception centre as a place to calm down, after an often dangerous journey towards Europe. One father compared the reception centre to a Tower of Babel, a melting pot of cultures, nationalities, and habits. Some fathers celebrated this diversity as enriching for their children's development.

> The mix of cultures opens my children's view and learns them how to live in diversity.
>
> Father of two children

Others rather feared the presence of 'different types of people, cultures, and backgrounds' and the continuous exchange of people. These fathers perceived the reception centre as an unsafe environment for their children to be raised and grow up. For example, fathers worried that other residents' and staff's behaviour, such as smoking and unfriendliness, may get normalized by their children and negatively impact their attitudes, norms, and values.

The interviews revealed that the family's private living space served not only as a place to sleep and rest but also as a playing area for the children, a place to eat, change clothes, and even wash the children when the hygienic conditions of communal sanitary facilities fall short. In particular, the absence of any sanitary facilities in their private living space was experienced as a barrier to properly caring for their children. A single father explained how he was compelled to bring his child to the neighbours if he wanted to take a shower. Another single father shared the following:

> If I want to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, I have to wake up my son and take him with me. [...] If he would wake up while I am on the toilet in our corridor and he wouldn't see me laying next to him, he would start screaming and I don't want that to happen.
>
> Father of one child

According to the participants, living together as a family in one room disrupts and violates the privacy between parents and children as well as between children themselves. In some families, the limited room negatively impacted the mental and physical health of parents and children. One father explicitly related his poor mental health to the room they were living in, whereas others feared that diseases could be easier spread around when family members must sleep near each other.

3.1.2 | Providing Food

All fathers in this study expressed the desire to cook 'according to their own culture and tradition'. Fathers who were given the infrastructural as well as financial support to do so appreciated this as very supportive in the education of their children. On the contrary, all fathers who had to eat prepared meals revealed that this is 'currently the most challenging issue in their children's education'. Those fathers expressed concerns regarding menu fatigue or acknowledged their children often dislike the prepared meals that are offered.

> If I am in the restaurant with my daughter, 80 percent of the time the food they serve is good for me but not necessarily for her.
>
> Father of two children

Another challenge relates to the fixed and limited hours the food is served. Although one father noted that this aspect 'ensures children eat only at healthy hours', others pointed out the difficult balance between this organizational aspect and the fulfilment of their children's needs.

> Sometimes my children get hungry at 3 p.m. but the restaurant opens only two hours later. What can I do then? Therefore, we always need to have food ready for them in our room.
>
> Father of two children

3.1.3 | Bringing Children to School

All fathers expressed sincere gratitude for their children's opportunity to attend school in Belgium, offering them a perspective for the future. However, school transportation was a daily concern a lot of participants raised; in particular, in two reception centres, parents were themselves responsible for bringing their children to and picking them up from school. Given the geographically isolated location of the reception centres in this study and the limited public transportation options available, most fathers brought their children on foot and experienced this as an exhausting task.

> The hardest thing for me is to take him to school [...] I'm really tired because of the road, I can't walk properly myself because of a problem in my back [...].
>
> Father of one child

3.1.4 | Fulfilling Material Needs

Most of the participants expressed concerns regarding the provision of their children's material needs such as clothes, toys, computers, and presents. The acquisition of certain material goods (hygiene products, clothes, and toys) or the use of services (sheet and blanket cleaning, medical healthcare, and Internet access) is strictly regulated in terms of amount per household and fixed opening hours to access them. To receive specific items, for example, tickets for public transportation, consent of staff has to be given.

> We had to wait until January to get another train ticket [...], but at that moment my son needed another ticket to go to Antwerp [to get clothes].
>
> Father of five children

3.2 | Coping Strategies: (In)formal Support and Problem-Solving

Both formal and informal support were uttered as (potentially) helpful in order to deal with their parenting challenges. All fathers agreed that a residence permit would bring relief and be 'the solution to all our problems'. Individual living units with own kitchen infrastructure and bathroom and 'no longer having to share anything' were also perceived as supportive. For the two-parent families in this study, the presence of the mother or of extended family members, with whom fathers can share the responsibility for their children, was perceived as extremely helpful. In a similar vein, single fathers wished to have their partner along as they currently 'have to fulfill the role of the father and the mother at the same time'. Few of them were receiving support from other single parents in the asylum centre.

> We have a very good neighbor here [...]. If I want to take a shower, she takes care of my daughter. As she is also a single parent, I do the same for her.
>
> A single father of one child

The three reception centres in this study organized children's activities on a weekly basis, and in two of the reception centres, a separate playroom was foreseen for young children. Most respondents made eagerly use of these facilities. Some respondents assigned a very supportive role to the children's activities in particular as 'meanwhile fathers can take a break or can go grocery shopping'.

Further, apart from a cooking group for migrant mothers in one of the centres, parenting support that was receptive or inclusive to fathers was not systematically offered. Several fathers indicated that their social worker is responsive to 'everyday concerns about our children' and 'questions about the school'. Fatherhood challenges, as discussed in this study, were by none of the fathers ever discussed with the staff. This lack of involvement caused feelings of frustration in some as it stressed the individual responsibility parents have to bear in a highly regulated institutional setting. Others felt relieved that nobody interferes with 'something that has to stay within the boundaries of our family'. Despite all challenges and the limited support available, fathers came up with different solutions to deal adaptively with their difficulties. Their daily efforts to educate their children in the reception centre is noteworthy. Herein, being a father seemed to be an important motivating factor and a reason they 'hold on and have patience'.

> [...] and yet, despite all our problems and my painful back, I walk my son to school every day for two hours.
>
> Father of one child

Due to financial constraints and the regulations in the reception centre, several fathers have adapted certain parenting practices like rewarding and consoling children. Some fathers made sacrifices towards themselves and promised their children small things within their capacity.

> I used to promise him to go to a place he likes to go [...] but here I cannot do that, I am very limited. I just can't promise him anything anymore.
>
> Father of one child

In response to the unsafe environment in the reception centre, either some fathers try to constantly accompany their children each time they put step outside their room, or others make strict and clear agreements with their children about when to be back and where to play. Most participants conveyed to take their children outside to a nearby park, swimming pool, or the city centre to entertain them and spend time together on a regular basis.

3.3 | Perceptions of Fatherhood

Despite the different ways of parenting, all fathers in this study attributed themselves an important role concerning their children and pursued to be good fathers. Different paternal roles were described. The roles of provider for and protector of their families were, for the majority of the participants, the most important ones. Some considered themselves responsible

for passing on norms and values and spending time with their children.

Not being able to fully take up these roles evoked negative feelings, including guilt and shame. Fathers related these feelings to their current position of dependency on others for accommodation, food, and material needs and their incapacity to make decisions about key aspects of their children's education.

> I'm ashamed each time we have to go to the restaurant. I am ashamed because I want to work, earn money, and provide food for my family myself.
>
> Father of one child

Some respondents indicated that this, in turn, affected their identity as a man and as a father. One father revealed:

> Here, I am no longer worthy to be a father. Father of one child

Due to the unemployment of the vast majority of interviewees, most fathers were able to often engage and interact with their children, even more than in the country of origin.

> In Palestine, I always had work to do [...]; now I am always busy with him [his son]. I can raise him more here.
>
> Father of one child

Several fathers started to take up a bigger part of the practical tasks in the upbringing of their children, increasing their involvement in parenting. For example, bringing their children to school and back, assisting them with homework, and helping their partners out with household chores on a daily basis. For one father, the sense of relative safety in the asylum centre allowed him to pay more attention to his son's education:

> Our living circumstances in Turkey were so challenging we didn't have time to think about our son's education [...]. Here we are safe, which gives us the chance to think more about his education.
>
> Father of one child

Overall, the increased time fathers could spend with their children was experienced as very positive. A single father described parenting as a whole new experience and even as a shock. However, he felt more like a father than ever before.

> Raising a child is totally new to me but ... I feel more like a father, more than ever before.
>
> A single father of one child

4 | Discussion

With families representing as many as 43% of the population in the Belgian refugee reception network (Fedasil 2022), parenting is an everyday reality in these institutional places. Through in-depth interviews with 21 migrant fathers raising their children in an asylum centre in Belgium, this study aimed to shed light on fathers' parenting practices, experiences, and perspectives.

Fatherhood practices and conceptions are shaped by cultural, political, economic, and individual factors and can change over time and place (Duckworth and Buzzanell 2009; Latshaw 2011). The findings of this study do reveal that fatherhood is experienced and practiced in a variety of ways, with all being committed to being good fathers and seeking to have valuable interactions with their children. However, for most participants, this study was the very first time they were addressed as fathers and were asked questions about parenting and their role as a father in the asylum centre. As argued by Ghorashi (2005), Yuval-Davis (2011), and Keygnaert, Vettenburg, and Temmerman (2012), our participants confirm to predominantly be seen, treated, and taken care of as migrants in the first place. Hereby, active adults are transformed into passive clients (Ghorashi 2005) and get assigned a strictly defined role as vulnerable, in need of protection, and without any form of agency. Paradoxically, our findings show that fathers actively seek solutions to answer the daily challenges they face and create own parenting strategies, hereby resisting existing reception structures imposed on them.

Alike in the narratives of Middle Eastern refugee men in Sweden in the recent works of Bergnehr (2022) and Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund (2021), fatherhood served as a motivating factor to deal with the uncertain and challenging circumstances they and their families found themselves in. Within their (limited) capacities, the fathers in this study engaged with and cared for their children on a daily basis and were actively involved in their upbringing. Some of them admitted to feeling more like a father, which was also voiced by refugee fathers in Sweden (Bergnehr 2022). In this way, the migrant men in this study construct and perform *caring masculinities* (K. Elliott 2016; Hanlon 2012; Scambor et al. 2014), which is in contrast with the social imaginaries of (mostly Muslim and/or African) male migrants as violent, dominant and 'troubling' (Dermott and Miller 2022, 88; Wyss 2022). Being involved in caring practices, it could be argued that fathers in this study did engage with contemporary involved fathering, which constitutes the sharing of caring activities within the family (Dermott and Miller 2015). It should however be noticed, as in preceding work of Dermott and Miller (2022), that this increased involvement in family life often went along with frustrations about fathers' unfulfilled roles as breadwinners. The latter namely continued to be taken a prominent aspect in the participants' aspirations as men, fathers, and husbands. Disregarding parental identities, the organizational aspects of the asylum centre leave fathers in a position of dependency for the execution of daily parental tasks, as also shown in the study of Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn (2020). In our study, one of the biggest challenges was the reliance on prepared meals. Allowing residents to cook for themselves is considered as a good practice by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO 2016). Men's responsibility to engage in paid work and provide food for their families serves as a direct outcome of the notion of men as breadwinners and primary providers (Haas and Hwang 2008; Hanlon 2012; Medved 2016). This normative expectation constitutes 'a relentlessly central component of fatherhood throughout

the world' (Wahlström Henriksson 2020, 322) and serves to attain the socially most valued *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The role of father-as-provider, which was central in the participating fathers' accounts (Dermott and Miller 2022), and the practice of sharing food, which creates a feeling of 'home' (Halldén 2003; Helavirta 2011), are both heavily reduced and made practically impossible. Further, fathers were put in a position with limited possibilities to foresee a safe living space and protect their children from negative influences in the asylum centre, despite the responsibility they felt to fulfil this task. The present study supports the findings of Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) suggesting that not being able to fulfil the role as providers for and protectors of their families evokes strong feelings of guilt and shame in migrant fathers, undermining men's sense of identity and self-worth.

The recast Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU), laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, states in Article 12 that member states shall 'seek to ensure full compliance with the principles of the best interests of the child and of family unity' (Article 9) and 'take appropriate measures to maintain as far as possible family unity as present within their territory, if applicants are provided with housing by the Member State concerned' (Article 12). In applying these, the recast directive explicitly commits to comply with the broader right to family life enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (EASO 2016). Despite these legally enshrined commitments, fathers in this study still found their roles as parents, while staying in the asylum centre, challenging. Except for the differentiation in room type between single migrants and migrant families (including single parents), organizational aspects of the asylum centre, mostly top-down implemented, seemed to strongly impede—rather than protect—the maintenance and realization of family life as these fathers would want it to be (Lietaert, Verhaeghe, and Derluyn 2020).

Further, the findings suggest that the needs of a family are often a translation of children's needs. This child-oriented approach to parenting in a migration context, previously suggested by De Haene, Grietens, and Verschueren (2007), V. Elliott (2007), Lewig, Arney, and Salveron (2010) and Raffaetà (2016), neglects parents' individual characteristics and falls short of any support needs they may have as a parent. If attention is paid to the voice of parents, most of the time migrant mothers are heard (e.g. in cooking groups), leaving the (single) migrant father and his needs out of sight.

Despite the emergence of a more nuanced understanding in research and practice of men as migrants, including their roles as fathers (Hibbins and Pease 2009), we argue that migrants' unique voices, experiences, and understandings remain left unheard in the organization and the practical implementation of asylum reception initiatives. This systematically limits the recognition of and support for residents' roles as fathers and hinders them to perform and enjoy fatherhood, entailing a source of support, hope, and happiness, in particular during adverse and stressful times.

5 | Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study call to drastically rethink and reform current reception practices and policies that systematically put families with children in collective housing during the determination of their asylum application. Following the support needs expressed by migrant fathers in this study, several recommendations can be formulated.

With fatherhood serving as a motivating factor in the lives of many men who participated in this study, migrant fathers applying for asylum—like migrant mothers—should be better recognized, valued, and supported in their roles as parents. To this end, the implementation of fathering support group in reception centres could be beneficial. Collectively sharing individual experiences in a safe, all-male environment with other fathers applying for asylum could support fathers in their parenting practices (Pfitzner, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2020; Riggs et al. 2016). Such initiatives would also create the opportunity to develop new social support communities in reception centres across nationalities and languages yet mainly based on their paternal identity (Pfitzner, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2020). Further, adopting an intersectional approach that recognizes migrants' multiple identities—one of which is a father—necessitates the reduction of fathers' dependency on the reception centre to execute parental tasks and to meet the needs of their children. Leaving fathers with a choice regarding the organization of the key aspects in the education of their children, such as cooking, school transportation, and the provision of material stuff, would already be considered supportive in their roles as fathers. Ultimately, housing families—including single parents—in individual living units equipped with their own cooking facility and bathroom would increase their parental autonomy significantly. Nevertheless, as long as policies invariably prioritize the identity as 'migrant' over one's identity as 'parent', fundamental change will fail to occur (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008). The present study is therefore an attempt to incessantly challenge such legislation and its disastrous impact on families' intimate lives.

6 | Limitations

This study has several possible limitations. First, given the qualitative nature of the study, there is the possibility of social desirability bias. Due to feelings of loyalty towards the support participants receive in the reception centre, they might have been hesitant to express negative experiences (Lietaert 2016). This was visible during some interviews, with fathers repeatedly stressing the efforts of the social workers and the difficulty of their jobs. On the contrary, participants might have magnified the negative aspects in their stories as the presence of an (independent) researcher could have instigated hope for additional support or improvement of their situation (Lietaert 2016). Some fathers asked for practical help or information during or after the interview, upon which the researcher referred them to support services inside or outside the asylum centre. At the end of the interview, most participants expressed genuine gratitude to the researcher for addressing this topic, listening to their stories, and approaching them as a father. Some harboured hope that their contribution

to the study might have an impact on the long term, on the situation of others in the future.

Second, recruitment of participants was done by two different strategies. In the situation where the reception centre's employee recruited the participants, it is possible that feelings of loyalty or gratitude or the hope to receive additional support (unconsciously) influenced the recruitment strategy (Hugman, Pittaway, and Bartolomei 2011). Third, concerning the data collection and interpretation of the findings, the researcher had limited knowledge of the participants' lived realities. Due to the time constraints, a short-time participant observation preceding the in-depth interviews could partially accommodate this limitation. This limitation meant that the researcher could not ask in-depth questions about the specific context of each reception centre or build trust with the participants which is critical to elude more in-depth accounts than those collected in this study. Further research could, when addressing current limitations, get more insight into how fathers who apply for asylum perceive themselves and how they feel perceived by the asylum reception institution and related asylum and migration policies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A