

Gender and eco-domesticity: Are sustainable consumption and a return to the home emancipatory in Czechia?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Marta Kolářová** 

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Abstract

Recently, there has been renewed interest in homemaking and domestic practices and the revival of domesticity has become related with pro-environmental values and sustainable lifestyles in Western societies. The turn to domesticity tends to be associated with women. While some authors warn of a return to traditional gender roles within the household, others view eco-domesticity as a feminist project that values domestic practices. This article considers the gender-specific aspects of the revival in a post-socialist country and focuses on the gendered aspects of new domesticity. Specifically, it studies the gendered discourses and practices within eco-domesticity in Czechia, which include sustainable consumption, green prosumption and alternative parenting practices. Can the eco-conscious reclaiming of domesticity be viewed as a new form of feminism in Czechia? The study is based on a qualitative sociological research using in-depth interviews, participant observation and media analyses. It is argued here that this new 21st-century domesticity should be understood through the context of the Czech state's lengthy maternity/parental leave period, which leads to temporary domesticity. The examples of active fathers and self-reliant mothers undermine the traditional division of labour. Caring roles among men in the family are highly valued in eco-domesticity, and alternative gender roles are part of alternative sustainable lifestyles. Care in the home expands to collective activities of parents in community centres and other community projects and decreases the isolation of parents at home. Although inspired by trends from abroad, informants do not perceive eco-domesticity to be a new wave of feminism in Czechia.

Keywords

DIY, domesticity, gender, green prosumption, homemaking, sustainable lifestyles

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Introduction

The environmental and climate crisis has pushed countries in the Global North to reflect on everyday behaviours towards more sustainable lifestyles. In the second decade of the 21st century in particular, a revival of domesticity was observed in connection to efforts to adopt sustainable practices in Western societies (Padilla Carroll, 2016; Schor and Thompson, 2014). How do these processes manifest in Eastern Europe? The region is still affected by its state-socialist past, including do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, such as self-provisioning and self-help building, which had been motivated by economic factors and scarcity before 1989. This article offers insights into this subject from Czechia, an Eastern European country where green domestic practices today consist of a mixture of traditional techniques and new trends coming into the country from abroad.

The turn to domesticity tends to be associated with women (Aarseth, 2021; Matchar, 2013). However, some authors point to traditional gender roles within the household (Bobel, 2002; Parker and Morrow, 2017), others view contemporary eco-domesticity as a feminist project that values the domestic sphere and labour (Lundahl, 2016; Padilla Carroll, 2016). This article, therefore, situates the empirical research on Czech eco-domesticity within debates on the gendered aspects of contemporary domestic activities that are done to support sustainable consumption. It examines the gendered discourses and practices of Czech eco-domesticity, which include sustainable consumption, green prosumption¹ and alternative parenting practices. The article explores whether this revival of domesticity and care for nature is only associated with women. Does the (re)turn to the home mean that traditional gender roles are being adopted again, or is this eco-conscious reclaiming of domesticity viewed as emancipatory for women and, thus, as a new form of feminism?

This article suggests that eco-domesticity should be understood through the Czech context of a lengthy maternity/parental leave period provided by the state (Czech parents can take up to 4 years of leave per child), coupled with the experience of practising DIY under socialism. Because of the involvement of Czech men in green prosumption and 'conscious fatherhood', green domestic practices cannot be understood solely as the 'feminization of environmental responsibility' (Bauhardt, 2013). Moreover, the value put on the home, and domestic practices outside of the market, can be seen as emancipatory for both women and men. The article is structured as follows: First, the literature on eco-domesticity, the gendered aspects of sustainable consumption and prosumption, alternative childcare and feminist empowerment is reviewed. This is followed by an outline of the Czech context and the research methods. The findings from the analysis of gendered aspects of green domestic practices in Czechia are then presented. The study focuses on the gendered division of roles in sustainable households, the reconciliation of work and care, collective green domestic practices and their relation to feminism.

Theoretical framework

New eco-domesticity and a return to the home

Before industrialisation in Western contexts, the home was a place where productive work and reproductive care intertwined and women and men, though involved in

different tasks, cooperated. However, modernisation processes led to a separation of the public and private spheres, the detachment of productive work from reproduction and the association of unpaid domestic work with women. Second wave feminists viewed domestic work as bringing women drudgery, isolation, powerlessness and the denial of identity. In order to achieve emancipation, women had to leave the home, pursue careers and integrate into the labour market (Gillis and Hollows, 2009).

However, in the 21st century, there has been renewed interest in homemaking and domestic practices in Western societies (Aarseth, 2021; Bobel, 2002; Hayes, 2010; Lundahl, 2016; Padilla Carroll, 2016; Parker and Morrow, 2017). Women have found pleasure in performing domestic practices previously understood as tedious and as limiting women's participation in paid work. Recently, homemaking has become associated with pro-environmental values and sustainable lifestyles. Eco-domesticity 'as way of life connects to the frugality of the simple living and minimalism movements, the imagined self-reliance of smallholder independence offered by back-to-the-land, self-sufficiency, and urban homesteading movements' (Padilla Carroll, 2016: 55).

According to Matchar (2013), the 'new domesticity' trend in the United States has occurred as a response to food quality scandals, health concerns and the destruction of the environment. She found that young women were leaving the workforce to become stay-at-home mothers who cook from scratch, grow their own organic food and home-school their children. This new domesticity includes the practice of attachment parenting, and DIY practices connected with sustainable prosumption reflect a rejection of industrially processed food and alienation in the workplace. The new domesticity is an expression of taking responsibility for oneself (Matchar, 2013).

Hayes (2010) calls this renewed interest in homemaking 'radical' in order to differentiate contemporary homemakers from the housewives of the past but also to underscore their strong ecological ethic. She studied people who live 'ecologically sustainable, self-sufficient, home-centred life' (Hayes, 2010: 184) and noticed the cooperation between men and women and the strong family cohesion. Men's homemaking found expression in the construction of houses and the repairing of homes, furniture and cars. The new domesticity is not, according to Bratich and Brush (2011), just about a return to the household. The sharing of DIY culture online has also brought the private sphere into the public space, and activities that were previously contained between four walls have moved onto the streets and into cyberspace.

Sustainable consumption, prosumption and gender

United Nations declarations have defined sustainable consumption since the 1990s. In the last three decades, individuals and households have been made primarily responsible for sustainability actions in developed countries (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Seyfang (2011) criticises the mainstream approach to sustainable consumption as promoting economic growth and marketing green products. She offers a 'new economics' approach with indicators of sustainable consumption, such as local provisioning and self-reliance, DIY practices, collective action and community building. According to Schor and Thompson (2014), sustainable lifestyles include downshifting, self-provisioning and

DIY practices, and organising in communities, as they show in their study of the ‘plentitude movement’.

DIY is an area that connects consumption with production, however, according to Wehr (2012), is not only limited to masculine DIY home improvement and repair projects (Moisio et al., 2013) but instead encompasses a much larger sphere of self-led activities practised mostly at home (e.g. growing food or homeschooling). The DIY concept refers both to manual work and to the craving for autonomy. Wehr defines DIY primarily as independence from experts and professionals, taking control of one’s own life and striving for self-reliance. DIY represents a distrust in and opting out of public institutions such as healthcare or education and the transfer of these activities and responsibility for them back to the household (Wehr, 2012). Eco-domestic practices include green prosumption, a co-construction of both production and consumption. Prosumers, people who consume self-produced things and services at home, try to limit buying commodities and free themselves from the market system (Perera et al., 2020).

Gender scholars have argued that mainstream sustainability policies ignore gender dynamics and inequalities within the household, regarding them as irrelevant or exploiting them to achieve sustainability agenda goals (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Studies on sustainable consumption have shown that women engage in sustainable practices more than men do, because they are more socially responsible and environmentally aware (Costa Pinto et al., 2014). Women in households make decisions on consumption in everyday life more than men because of the gendered division of household roles (Hawkins, 2012; Isenhour and Ardenfors, 2009). Women are still responsible for the reproduction of households on the everyday level and consumption practices increase unpaid work for women in households (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Furthermore, women (might) suffer from ‘eco-stress’ (Vinz, 2009) and they experience conflicts between their roles as mothers and as sustainable consumers (Black and Cherrier, 2010). Murphy and Parry investigate whether it is possible to achieve a more equal distribution of domestic work in sustainable consumption practices. By re-entangling work and care, they show ‘how household sustainability can be progressive in relation to gender and sustainability simultaneously – doubly progressive’ (Murphy and Parry, 2021: 1099). They suggest that it is better to understand domestic practices through the concept of care instead of work because this ‘perspective does not focus on equality of distribution but instead highlights the content of caring relations’ (Murphy and Parry, 2021: 1106).

New domesticity, childcare and parenthood

Although not every sustainable household constitutes a family, and not all sustainable consumers have children, childcare practices are an important part of new eco-domesticity. The research on care and sustainable consumption focuses on mothers and their responsibility for protecting their children and nature (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Mothers of the ‘organic child’ (Cairns et al., 2013), for instance, feel responsible for their children’s development and health. Their mothering practices include ethical organic food consumption, which constitutes a significant element in good mothering and individualised control over a child’s future.

The ideal of the organic child shows that childcare practices are not only environmentally motivated but also related to health concerns. Similarly, MacKendrick (2018) argues that it is usually mothers who take responsibility for gatekeeping environmental contamination in the home and producing healthy children. In trying to avoid synthetic chemicals and protect children from toxic ingredients by buying organic products, women practise 'precautionary consumption', especially during and after pregnancy.

Mothers who give birth at home, breastfeed for an extended time and homeschool their children are choosing a child-centred lifestyle and abandoning their careers. These 'natural mothers', in their resistance to consumerism and state institutions, represent, according to Bobel (2002), an alternative to conventional mothering. They embrace an ideology that posits the biological determinism of motherhood and the superiority of nature. The household division of labour is, thus, based on natural differences between men and women, and mothers are constructed as irreplaceable, which leads to the marginalisation of fathers within parenting.

This essentialist perspective of women being closer to nature than men is problematic as caring qualities are limited to women, and men then have little space for being active in caring for both family and the planet. However, there are already alternative manifestations of masculine care in various forms of ecological masculinities, for example, conscious fathers, rural farmers and back-to-the-land men (Hultman and Pulé, 2018), as well as within a new discourse of profeminist environmentalism (Pease, 2019).

New domesticity, empowerment and feminism

Scholars agree that the revival of the home tends to be associated with women, and men's involvement in domestic practices is rather temporary or secondary (Aarseth, 2021; Bobel, 2002; MacKendrick, 2018; Matchar, 2013). Whereas some authors warn of a return to traditional gender roles within the household (Bobel, 2002; Parker and Morrow, 2017), others view eco-domesticity as a feminist project that values domestic practices (Lundahl, 2016; Padilla Carroll, 2016).

On one hand, Parker and Morrow (2017), who studied household self-provisioning and intensive mothering, argue that everyday work in the homestead is done mainly by women, strengthening the traditional gender division of labour. The authors interpret mother's work as a burden and a reinforcement of the intensive motherhood ideology. On the other hand, Lundahl (2016) points out that femivorism – a movement that emphasises sustainable food and intensive mothering – is not a return to traditional post-war gender roles but rather a new brand of feminism based on intelligence and creativity. According to Matchar (2013), homemaking is no longer associated with drudgery but is instead seen as an appealing and fulfilling activity. Contemporary women see their eco-friendly homemaking as a vocation, and they reclaim domesticity as a progressive feminist act. Some natural mothers studied by Bobel (2002) also identify as feminists who see natural mothering as a means to achieving social change from below and embrace a maternalist discourse that valorises feminine values.

Padilla Carroll (2016), who studied North American discourses of new domesticity, argues that domestic practices can be creative and empowering. She sees the contemporary return to the home as both feminist environmentalist domesticity and a radical

anti-capitalist project. New domesticity is critical of work outside the home in the market economy and rejects capitalism for commodifying homemaking. It offers an alternative to capitalist consumerism based on the return to the home, which is valued as a radical place for family and community change, and transition to sustainability. Familial self-reliance is not isolation; it is tied to community relationships. In this sense, eco-domesticity is viewed as a feminist action empowering both women and men within households and local communities (Padilla Carroll, 2016).

Case study: Czech eco-domesticity

This research is motivated by the fact that although sustainable lifestyles have been studied in Czechia since the 1990s (Librová, 1994, 2003), the gender aspects of green domestic practices have not been directly addressed. Librová (1994) conducted longitudinal research among voluntary simplifiers² and found that women who stayed at home with their children had simple lifestyles because there was just one household income, provided by the father. Ten years later, these same women had returned to paid work, and the families had become more financially secure, which also led to a decrease in their self-provisioning (Librová, 2003). In a study of the representation of ‘bio-mothers’ (natural mothers) in the media, Lišková (2016) found that these women are viewed rather negatively as irresponsible, selfish, unattractive and a threat to the social order in Czech society. Because of that, women who publicly promote sustainable lifestyles and natural mothering are thus reluctant to identify with the label ‘bio-mother’ (Lišková, 2016).

This study focuses on the gender aspects of eco-domesticity, which includes the practices of sustainable consumption, green prosumption and alternative parenting. This set of practices is both a data-driven conceptualisation (it stems from empirical research and is influenced by definitions of reality formed by the informants) and it is also related to theoretical concepts, the closest of which is eco-domesticity (Padilla Carroll, 2016).

An example of this set of interrelated practices is a description of practices of one Czech family, which combines various practices in their ‘green domestic’ lifestyle:

The daughters had no diapers as the family practised nappy-free infant hygiene, the babies were carried on the body of mum or dad, are not vaccinated, do not visit the doctor regularly because the family gives them homoeopathic medicine, [. . .] they buy healthy and local food, use eco hygienic products and natural cosmetics. They have not owned a television or a refrigerator for several years. They are building a straw-bale house in a do-it-yourself manner and have started a permaculture garden. (Pravý domácí časopis, 1/2013)

Post-socialist context of eco-domesticity

Sustainable consumption practices are a relatively new and marginal phenomenon in contemporary Czech society. For instance, only 1% of the Czech population is vegetarian and 17% of Czechs consider eco-labels important for their consumer choices. The most widespread pro-environmental behaviour is waste separation, practised by 91% of the population (Krajhanzl et al., 2018). Those who are engaged in more radical

sustainable practices or several practices at the same time (such as ethical shopping, reusing, recycling, veganism, organic self-provisioning, chemical avoidance, nappy-free hygiene and natural medical care) are considered alternative.

Eco-domesticity is practised by a segment of society consisting of tens of thousands of people, which is both represented and co-created by an alternative print publication, *Pravý domácí časopis* (Real Homemade Magazine). The magazine focuses on sustainable lifestyles, eco-homemaking and attachment parenting together with alternative spirituality and personal growth. It showcases various domestic practices such as eco-gardening, cooking from scratch, natural building, traditional crafts, alternative healing and homeschooling. The magazine itself is a DIY product made in the home of its editor-in-chief (a woman) and a graphic designer (her husband).

The contemporary green domestic practices have their roots in the DIY activities that existed under socialism. Food self-provisioning, self-help building and home repairs were rather common and widespread during the previous regime (Gibas and Šima, 2020). Under socialism, DIY represented an escape into the private sphere, away from ideology and the impossibility of self-realisation in official employment. While DIY was motivated by a desire for creative expression, there was also an essential form of DIY – it was a means of producing items that were unavailable on the market (Bílek and Činátlová, 2010).

Today's green prosumers learn the old crafts of making bread from sourdough, making cheese, fermenting, scything, planting old varieties of trees, felting and weaving, which were not as common under socialism. Local traditional crafts are coupled with innovative practices imported from abroad, such as permaculture gardening, zero waste living or alternative healing. Other domestic practices, such as homebirth and homeschooling, were not common under socialism. The 'turn to tradition' is thus a selective process, a bricolage of local and global practices and of old ways of doing things with new technologies.

Many stories published in *Pravý domácí časopis* reveal various motivations for this lifestyle that include independence from corporations, distrust of public institutions, a craving for self-reliance and interest in manual skills for making things. The turn to domesticity was not influenced by high unemployment rates – Czechia has had among the lowest unemployment rates in Europe in recent years³ – but is motivated more by people's dissatisfaction with employment in the corporate sector and stress from work. There are also strong environmental motivations, which are tied together with health concerns.

However, the economic motives for adopting green domestic practices did not disappear with the end of socialism. Despite a growing alternative market, the higher prices of organic products could put these goods out of reach for some green consumers. Prosumption is thus a strategy of sustainable consumption that could appeal to the lower-middle class and groups such as single mothers.

Another important context for Czech eco-domesticity is the family politics of the state. Czechia has perhaps the longest paid maternity/parental leave in the world. Maternity leave provides (only) women with about 70% of their previous wage for 28 weeks. Both the father or mother can take a subsequent parental leave, and the family can choose a period of leave that lasts until the child is either 2, 3 or 4 years of age. The state benefit for the whole period is about 12,000 euros, which, in the 3-year scenario, is

about one-quarter the average wage. Jobs are protected and parents are entitled to return to their original jobs even after several consecutive parental leaves. The father stays at home with the children in 2% of Czech families (Czech Statistical Office, czso.cz). Historically, Czech women have always had to combine a job with childcare (Věšínová-Kalivodová, 2005). From the start of the state-socialist period in the 1950s, the rate of female employment was very high. However, women were still the main caregivers, and traditional gender roles in the family were supported by the socialist state starting in the 1970s when the government extended maternity leave and introduced pro-natal measures. The process of refamilisation led to a double shift of work and care in women's lives. Explicit familialism, the male-breadwinner model and lengthy parental leave have continued in the decades since the fall of communism (Marková Volejníčková, 2018). Czechia has a specific model of female employment, with a high rate of employment in general but a lengthy period of economic inactivity among mothers on parental leave (Hašková et al., 2015).

Due to the communist regime, there was no second wave of feminism in the 1970s such as there was in the West – the women's movement only revived itself as late as the 1990s. Gender studies were established in the 1990s in Czech universities, and the participation of women in politics has slowly grown; however, feminism has been marginalised in mainstream society, and women are often unwilling to call themselves feminists (Nash, 2002).

Research methodology

This analysis is based on qualitative research methods, and the data are interpreted on the basis of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Several techniques were used to collect the data for this analysis: a study of documents, participant observation and in-depth interviews from the 2017–2019 period. The analysis started with a qualitative content analysis of the alternative medium *Pravý domácí časopis*, which has a circulation of approximately 12,000 copies. The media content (since its first publication in 2013) was coded and categorised to explore significant themes and their meanings. This was coupled with an in-depth interview with the magazine's editor-in-chief. Other materials and resources were also studied, such as books, mass media articles, websites and videos by organisations and individuals promoting green domestic practices.

The analysis of the materials and media sheds light on the discourses and representations of eco-domesticity role models. To explore green domestic practices in real life, I conducted participant observation in individual households, five eco-communities, community centres, community gardens, festivals and courses on designing permaculture, making eco-cosmetics and making shoes by hand. I conducted 23 in-depth interviews with homemakers and homesteaders both in urban and rural settings. The interviews included 8 men and 17 women (two interviews with both partners). The sample was made up of green prosumers who grow and preserve their own food, build houses, and live 'close to nature', mainly in rural areas. Other domestic practices, such as home-schooling or homebirth, were of secondary importance for this sample. All the names of informants were anonymised.

Open coding was used in the analysis to segment the data and techniques for increasing theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Axial and selective coding were used to analyse how the codes related to a central category ('green domestic lifestyle') and to interpret its dimensions. The coding protocol was made in MaxQDA.

Findings

An important context for understanding Czech eco-domesticity is the high value afforded to the sphere of the home, childcare and sustainable lifestyles by the editors of *Pravý domácí časopis*, who stress the creative and positive aspects of eco-domesticity. They are perceived as a source of self-fulfilment and joy, a valuable way to spend one's leisure time, an alternative way of making a living. Self-provisioning is portrayed not as hard work but as the act of creating an edible garden that represents a paradise in harmony with nature. Eco-domesticity is viewed as an arena of inventiveness and innovation, a source of self-actualisation and empowerment. Behind this enthusiasm is awareness that green domestic practices are a matter of choice and not necessity (speaking of the era before the COVID-19 pandemic). Even though the proponents of eco-domesticity occasionally admit difficulties, especially when dealing with negative reactions from other people or the demanding choices of sustainable consumer practices, overall, their message is positively framed.

Gender division of domestic roles

It is predominantly women who shape the eco-domesticity discourse. Green domestic practices here are more associated with women and this is because there are more women than men on parental leave. The focus of *Pravý domácí časopis* is on family issues and the home; however, these are represented as areas from which men are not excluded and in which they are portrayed as significant. Men are perceived as indispensable in the DIY construction and renovation of natural houses, but they are also represented as active fathers involved in childcare.

Both the traditional gender division of domestic roles and alternative family arrangements exist side by side within the pages of the magazine. The practices that women adopt usually include home cooking; decision-making about food and consumption in general; shopping for local and organic food and other items; growing and conserving food; producing homemade cosmetics, cleaning products and medicine; eco-friendly washing laundry; sewing; composting and attachment parenting (giving birth at home, long breastfeeding and homeschooling children).

Women often mentioned that the arrival of children frequently motivated them to live more sustainably. During pregnancy and when having small children, their first concerns were about their family's health, but soon environmental motives were added. They started to buy organic food, home-cooked meals, washed without chemicals or even started to grow their own food: 'We moved closer to nature, to the countryside after our kids were born, because I wanted for them the best food, home-cooked, so I started to grow vegetables, potatoes. We have our own milk' (Anna, interview 3).

Men's typical involvement in green domestic practices comprise self-help home-building using natural materials, making furniture and household equipment, managing energy prosumption (renewable energy sources like solar and wind) and compost toilets, cutting wood and repairing things.

A typical example of traditional gender roles is represented by a family that lives in a 'free house', a wooden house that the father in the family built himself in 3 months with occasional help from friends. He built the house because he did not want to get into debt. By working as a lecturer, he is the household breadwinner, while the mother stays at home with their two children and homeschools them, grows food and cooks (Pravý domácí časopis 2/2013).

Regarding the gender division of roles, the media representation and reality (according to my observations and interviews) match. When I was visiting the households of green prosumers, I often met couples who followed this traditional division of roles. In the families who had built their own houses, the man was the builder because the woman was usually busy taking care of their breastfed babies and young children; the woman had wanted to help build the home, but the toddlers were in the way of the construction. Men's greater physical strength and previous experience with manual labour and repair work are viewed as the factors which determine that men should do the construction work. This division of labour seems 'natural' and is not questioned.

However, there are examples of families (both in the media representation and in reality) where the roles were divided differently. The most noticeable examples were families with active, conscious fathers and those of single 'self-sufficient' mothers. First, the role of an active father who takes care of children is supported by the magazine, which devotes space to stories about fathers on parental leave. The active fathers take care of children, cook meals and assist their partners in homebirth and homeschooling.

For instance, one father, a mountaineer and adventurer who decided to be a 'conscious father' while the mother runs an eco-products business said that 'for the sixth year, I've been cooking, wiping the kids' butts, playing and trying to stay sexy enough for my sweetheart. It's great to experience all these things' (Pravý domácí časopis, 2015: 3). The editor-in-chief commented favourably on his story and considered this father sufficiently masculine. Masculinity is represented as multifaceted, and active, conscious fatherhood is appreciated in the magazine.

Other active fathers support their partners in areas related to women's issues. Ondřej, a permaculturalist, assisted his partner in a natural pregnancy and homebirth. Together, they made a documentary on self-reliant homebirth.⁴ Another couple, the parents of five children who were born at home, centre their life on family and homeschooling. While the mother, Lucie, writes books and gives lectures on homebirth, her supportive partner assumes the responsibility of caring for their children and homeschooling. He speaks about the importance of breaking free from the notion that a man must be the main breadwinner:

A long time ago I believed that to be a real man, I had to have quite a business. Ten years working with computers brought me above-average income and led me to collapse. I realised I wanted to live differently. (Pravý domácí časopis 2013/3: 23)

There was also a family with an alternative division of gender roles in the informant sample. The father, Matěj – who moved to a rural area with his family to live a self-reliant life – grows food for his family and keeps animals, whereas his wife is the official breadwinner who works outside the home as a nurse (Interview 10).

The second example of alternative family arrangements is represented by single mothers who are back-to-the-landers and who live without a partner. These stories come from interviews with two women, both of whom bought land in the countryside with their partner. The men abandoned the common vision to live self-sufficiently, leaving the women. As a result, both had to continue as single mothers with the help of friends and family members.

For instance, Lída, a single mother of five children who manages her organic homestead, writes a blog called *Self-sufficient Women* and organises courses for women where they can learn how to make eco-cosmetics, herbal remedies and homemade bread or cheese (interview 12). These women value self-reliance, but not in a feminist sense; they did not plan to live a life in a family homestead without a man. However, they had to adjust to the situation and realised they could do it on their own. Even though they both are doing physical work – in their homesteads – they maintain attributes of traditional femininity, such as having long hair and wearing long skirts. They do not transgress the feminine role in their appearance, and they do not want to look and behave like men.

Temporary domesticity: Reconciling work and care

Homesteaders in rural areas must find ways to combine self-provisioning with earning money. Families choose various ways of doing this: in some, one partner (woman or man) has a regular job; in others, they both work on their homestead and have additional incomes (e.g. lecturing on permaculture gardening or selling products from their farm). Maternity/parental allowance or even a retirement pension can significantly contribute to the family budget.

Homemaking in the city, which involves less food production, is, more so than homesteading, related to 'stay-at-home motherhood'. However, this return to the home is not as radical as it is described in the United States by Matchar (2013) or Bobel (2002) because the turn to domesticity in Czechia is often only temporary.

There are mothers oriented towards eco-domesticity who usually choose to stay at home for as long as possible, and they have more children than the Czech average.⁵ Three or four children in a family are not exceptional. Some women can be at home with their children for more than 10 years, and some even extend this period by homeschooling their children. However, there are mothers who stay at home for several years on parental leave, enjoy caring for their children and return to their jobs or change their careers to be more in accord with their alternative values.

For instance, I regularly visited one community centre in Prague where women on maternity leave and their children gathered in a pre-school 'Waldorf circle'. Inspired by this alternative education system, they met weekly to engage in creative activities. All the women were college-educated professionals but chose to spend their time with their children at home rather than pursuing a career. They liked taking care of their children; however, they also used the time spent on parental leave for their personal development.

They invested in their continuing education; for instance, a medical doctor studied homoeopathy, a schoolteacher learned yoga, an ecologist became an aroma therapist, an economist started giving massages (field notes). In these cases, it was the experience of a domesticity that made them rethink their work outside of the home.

Spending a long time at home on maternity/parental leave is specific to Czech society and a crucial factor that underpins the new domesticity, or rather the weak version of it. Czech women do not have to choose to either work or care for the family, especially during the period soon after the birth of a child. They can actually do both, but in successive stages. The Czech version of the return to the home is usually a temporary one, so we can speak about *temporary domesticity*.

Collective green domestic practices

Women (or men) on parental leave are also active in the local community. They organise social and cultural activities or neighbourhood festivities for local residents, or they are active in local environmental projects, such as planting trees. They also get involved in various community activities, such as community-supported agriculture (CSA) or community gardens. Community centres where local people and parents with children can meet and attend sports or art courses have boomed in the last decade. Workshops are organised in these centres, so women (and sometimes men) can collectively make sourdough bread, barefoot shoes, eco-cosmetics or felt toys; they also share tools, materials and know-how in these groups.

The parents who homeschool their children (mostly mothers) organise groups of home schoolers who meet and share their knowledge and experience. Some of them have even founded community schools. Zuzana (interview 23), for example, gave birth to her three children at home and stayed many years on parental leave with them while also taking care of their eco-farm. She now works as a 'guide' for children in an alternative school. Green prosumers in rural areas who live close to each other in loosely connected local communities, such as Ela (interview 21), meet with their neighbours, share gardening and construction tools and organise activities for children and other events, such as cider pressing or celebrations.

Collective green domestic practices are supported and organised by *Pravý domácí časopis*. The editors organise events for their readers, including fair-trade breakfasts, collective breadmaking and DIY competitions like recycled handmade products or living on zero waste. They also mediate contacts between readers by publishing various maps (e.g. maps of bread makers who share sourdough). The magazine helps support networking among people with similar interests who can then meet physically or virtually on the Internet. In this sense, eco-domestic practices are not enclosed only within the private sphere of individual households but extend to local communities and communities of interest.

Relation to feminism

This generation of contemporary mothers interested in eco-domesticity perceives feminism in its most visible form, as equal opportunities campaigns for greater representation

of women in the public sphere, in paid jobs and politics, and gender mainstreaming in policymaking (Wilson-McDonald, 2023) which leads them to view it as being at odds with their position as homemakers and caretakers. There is no mention of feminism in *Pravý domácí časopis*. The editors do not find it necessary to relate to feminism in any way. Even though their perspective on women's roles could be perceived as ecofeminism,⁶ they do not label it as such. In the mainstream media, the editor-in-chief was challenged by a woman journalist (known to be a liberal feminist):⁷ 'I have noticed that the authors of the articles often describe themselves as mothers. Are you traditionalists?' The editor replied, 'Most of us are mothers. We are not traditionalists in the sense of stay-at-home mothers and breadwinner fathers, because every one of us has a thousand of other activities. But motherhood is important to us'. In this case, the journalist's question already implied that self-identification as a mother is linked to the traditional gender division of roles. However, the editor-in-chief does not perceive motherhood as retrograde, refusing the supposed passivity of stay-at-home mothers and strict gender roles. For her, eco-domesticity is based on family values, the revival of the home, but also the active approach of mothers, community involvement, alternative lifestyles and sustainable practices.

Although the Czech proponents of eco-domesticity emphasise self-reliance and value green domestic practices as a source of empowerment for women, it is not in a feminist sense. For instance, referring to women's roles in green prosumption in her blog *Self-Reliant Women*, Lída writes the following:

My wish is to awaken creative power in women. To show them that they do not have to depend on advertisements, processed food, or industrially produced cosmetics. By being able to milk a goat, to grow vegetables, preserve food, and collect herbs in nature, I strengthen my self-confidence in my mission as a woman who can protect her family, and can heal her loved ones.⁸

She frames green prosumption as a means of autonomy from larger systems such as corporations and markets, not as independence from men or patriarchy.

Discussion and conclusion

This article studied Czech eco-domesticity in the last decade as a set of practices containing sustainable consumption, green prosumption and alternative parenting. These practices are represented by an alternative publication framing a discourse on family-centred, eco-conscious, alternative lifestyles. It is women who lead this discussion both in the magazine and in associated organisations and communities. Thus, eco-domesticity is more associated with women; however, women perform active roles and present eco-domesticity as a project that should spread to the Czech wider society.

This new domesticity, in most cases, is related to a gendered division of labour. Both genders are responsible for green domestic practices – not equally, but in complementary roles, and cooperate for the good of the family. However, examples of active fathers who care for their children show that men's active involvement in the family is highly valued, and the domestic sphere is not the exclusive domain of women. These fathers can be viewed as expressing a form of emerging ecological masculinities (Hultman and Pulé,

2018). Examples of single mothers who are ‘self-sufficient women’ and have taken on both the female and male roles in the homestead indicate that traditional gender roles are being transgressed. Thus, green domestic practices cannot be understood solely as the ‘feminization of environmental responsibility’ (Bauhardt, 2013) and alternative gender roles in the family can go hand in hand with sustainable lifestyles.

For urban homemakers, this new domesticity tends to be temporary as Czechia offers lengthy maternity/parental leave. Women become full-time homemakers, but for a limited time only; they adopt a model where stay-at-home motherhood is followed by full-time work (Marková Volejníčková, 2018). In addition, green domestic practices are not just performed individually in separate households as parents often engage in collective activities in community centres, or community gardens.

Is eco-domesticity emancipatory for women? If this question was posed from the perspective of an equal distribution of household work (Murphy and Parry, 2021), then the answer would be negative, with a few exceptions for transgressing gender roles. However, the issue of empowerment and emancipation is here seen from the distinct perspective in which the home and domestic practices are valued. Czech green prosumers and proponents of eco-domesticity view homemaking as a creative activity and a source of joy, not as a burden or as women’s servitude. They do not perceive themselves negatively, as ‘just’ housewives. In contrast to some studies (Parker and Morrow, 2017; Vinz, 2009), domestic practices are understood as a means of self-actualisation. The domestic sphere and self-reliance are valued, and unpaid work for family outside of the market and public institutions is appreciated. Work carried out for wages (mostly by men) is understood rather as a necessity than as self-actualisation and is valued less.

This study suggests that it is not the nurturing mother nor domestic femininity that is being re-romanticised (Aarseth, 2021), it is domesticity and green domestic practices as such that are being emphasised. I would argue that discussions of the return to traditional gender roles should challenge the category of ‘tradition’, which differs according to different sociocultural contexts. In Western countries, traditional femininity is usually equated with a return to the 1950s; in state-socialist countries, however, the gender division of labour was different in that period, with typical socialist propaganda depicting women as workers. Contemporary Czech green prosumers search for inspiration both in pre-socialist times and in examples from abroad.

Czech eco-domesticity is motivated by a feeling of alienation from nature and work, a distaste for consumerist lifestyles, an interest in creativity and autonomy, and health concerns (similar to the studies of Cairns et al., 2013; MacKendrick, 2018) – and not only among women but men as well. For green prosumers, the focus on family is much more important than a career in a corporate job. The individuals I studied believe that green domestic practices make both women and men feel empowered even though it might, from an outside perspective, seem like a retrograde move towards traditional gender roles.

Is eco-domesticity a new form of feminism? Even though the Czech proponents of eco-domesticity and the informants perceive green domestic practices as empowering, they do not claim allegiance to feminism at all. Women do not request equity with men in household tasks and do not demand justice for their unpaid work since they feel recognition for their domestic work. This is because this segment of society strongly values the home as a sphere of autonomous space outside market and capitalist relations.

Moreover, the general relation to feminism is different in Czechia: a movement for gender equality is not as widespread or as common as it is in Western societies and has rather negative connotations in Czech society. From the perspective of its practitioners, the eco-domesticity cannot, thus, be interpreted as a new wave of feminism that is a critique of liberal feminism.

Although the actors of eco-domesticity do not perceive themselves as feminists, they do not express anti-gender or anti-feminist sentiments. Men contribute to household sustainability both by their traditional masculine practices (such as natural building from recyclable materials or managing green energy prosumption) and by transgressing the traditional division of labour and adopting caring roles in the family. In these cases, care becomes defeminised, and looking after children is considered to also be masculine (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Environmental responsibility, in both cases, becomes a component of masculinity (Hultman and Pulé, 2018; Pease, 2019). Care is also enlarged beyond individualised families by creating relationships within home and in communities. These examples of Czech eco-domestic practices may provide hope that it is possible to see green domestic practices as doubly progressive regarding sustainability and gender (Murphy and Parry, 2021). The redefinition of the domestic sphere as valuable can contribute both to a better status for women and to a greater participation of men in this area.

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Notes

1. Green ‘prosumption’ refers to sustainable home production, a combination of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ (Perera et al., 2020).
2. Voluntary simplifiers are people who voluntarily choose a simple lifestyle, reduce their consumption and engage in non-consumption practices, such as repairing household items or food self-provisioning.

3. The unemployment rate decreased from 7.4% in 2010 to 2.87% in 2019 (Czech Statistical Office, czso.cz).
4. A documentary *Soběstačný porod* (2013) on a website: www.ondrejlanda.cz/sobestacnost
5. The fertility rate was 1.7 children per woman in 2019 (Czech Statistical office, czso.cz).
6. Even though ecofeminism and difference feminism were significant for the Czech feminist movement in the 1990s (Wilson-McDonald, 2023), the contemporary eco-domesticity does not relate to it.
7. Drtinová in DVTV, 4 September 2017.
8. <http://sobestačnezeny.cz>, 22 October 2018.

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