

# Changing Fatherhood: Social Differences in Parental Leave Uptake and Childcare Participation Among Bulgarian Men

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## Abstract

This study investigates social disparities in the uptake of paid parental leave (PPL) and engagement in childcare by Bulgarian fathers within the context of shifting gender norms and recent policy reforms. Based on survey data from 503 fathers of young children, it examines attitudes toward involved fatherhood, motivations and obstacles to PPL use, and the interaction between gender stereotypes and socioeconomic conditions. Despite EU-aligned measures such as a two-month non-transferable paternal leave, uptake remains limited due to enduring male breadwinner expectations, income-related disincentives, and traditional caregiving models centered on mothers. Findings indicate a hybrid model of fatherhood: While maternal dominance in caregiving persists, a growing number of fathers, particularly those with higher education or remote work opportunities, are adopting more egalitarian roles. Logistic regression results highlight key predictors of PPL uptake, including the number of children, household income, and workplace flexibility. Moreover, PPL use of fathers correlates positively with egalitarian gender attitudes, implying that paternal leave functions as both a reflection and a catalyst of cultural transformation. Nonetheless, ambivalence endures among lower-income and less educated fathers, for whom caregiving often conflicts with masculine identity. Overall, the analysis underscores that although normative shifts are emerging, sustained progress requires comprehensive support through policy, workplace culture, and broader societal change to promote equitable parenting and normalize active fatherhood. The findings enrich ongoing discussions on gender equality, social inclusion, and evolving masculinities in post-socialist societies.

## Keywords

Bulgaria; fatherhood; gender equality; gender roles; hybrid masculinity; paid parental leave (PPL); paternal involvement; work-life balance

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of fatherhood has evolved globally, from a traditionally distant provider role to one that emphasizes active emotional engagement and shared caregiving responsibilities:

We believe men can lead more caring and meaningful lives and support gender equality by increasing their commitment to childcare and caregiving. Gender equality will only be achieved when men are taking on their fair share of the care work. (MenCare, n.d.)

This is the guiding principle of the global MenCare initiative, which promotes programs and media campaigns worldwide to encourage parents, especially men, to become more caring, involved, and equitable in family life.

Including fathers in early childcare is critically important—not only for the child's development, but also for the well-being of the mothers and fathers themselves. Research across disciplines—developmental psychology, pediatrics, sociology, and public health—demonstrates the positive impacts of paternal involvement during a child's early years for children's cognitive and language development (Cabrera et al., 2007; Jeong et al., 2016) as well as for their emotional and social growth (Downer et al., 2008; Puglisi et al., 2024).

Fathers who take part in early caregiving also contribute to improved mental health for both parents. Mothers report lower levels of postnatal depression and stress (Kasamatsu et al., 2021), and couples experience reduced conflict around household responsibilities (Allport et al., 2018; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011). Additionally, paternal involvement strengthens the father-child bond, fosters secure attachment, and enhances fathers' sensitivity to their children's needs (Brown et al., 2018; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018).

## 2. Conceptual Framing

The concepts of “caring masculinity” and “involved fatherhood” promote care, nurturing, and emotional engagement as valuable, rather than marginal traits. They challenge traditional gender roles and focus on the responsibility and presence of fathers in family life, contributing to more egalitarian family structures. “Caring masculinity” (Elliott, 2016; Scambor et al., 2014) is a broader concept that marks an identity shift and redefinition of traditional male roles. The idea of caring masculinity challenges hegemonic masculinity by promoting non-violent, emotionally engaged, and socially responsible ways of being a man. It is grounded in feminist ethics of care and critical studies on men and masculinities.

The concept of “involved fatherhood” mainly focuses on behavioral practices and presupposes active, hands-on, and nurturing engagement of fathers in their children's lives. After the foundational work of Lamb et al. (1987), which really set the framework with engagement, accessibility, and responsibility as the three dimensions of father involvement, there has been a steady stream of key theoretical, empirical, and review papers (Cabrera et al., 2000, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Pleck, 2010).

The concept of “equal parenting” (“The Equal Parenting Project,” 2023) is closely related to the above-mentioned concepts, and its emphasis is on fairly sharing parenting duties between partners and dividing responsibilities to avoid overburdening one parent (often the mother). Paid parental leave (PPL) is considered to serve as a powerful tool for promoting men's caregiving roles. By offering financial support

and job protection, it facilitates fathers' active participation in early childcare and fosters a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities. PPL has a positive impact on enhanced father engagement in caretaking (Huerta et al., 2013; Nordenmark, 2015; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Rostgaard & Lauste, 2015) and the development of parenting skills of fathers as active co-parents rather than supporting mothers (Rehel, 2013). PPL is a meaningful instrument for strengthening father-child relationships (Yang et al., 2022) and promoting gender equality and more equitable workplace dynamics (Doucet, 2021; O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

### **3. Aim and Research Questions**

Based on the idea that fatherhood is understood as a multi-dimensional, relational, and context-dependent practice, shaped by cultural norms, family dynamics, and policy frameworks, this article aims to explore current practices and attitudes of fathers in Bulgaria concerning shared gender roles in childcare and PPL in the context of the recent changes in leave policies. The following research questions guide our analysis: What are the perceptions of fathers to incentives for more active involvement in leave uptake and childcare? What practices do fathers currently adopt in participation in childcare? Do gender stereotypes matter in the appreciation and uptake of PPL by fathers? What are the main differentiating factors among the different groups of fathers in PPL uptake?

The novelty of the current study on fatherhood and PPL can be assessed in the context of the limited research evidence available for Bulgaria. Recent Bulgarian research (Georgieva, 2022; Luleva, 2018; Nenova, 2017) points to emerging transformations in male identities, particularly among young middle-class fathers. These men increasingly integrate care, empathy, and relationality into their self-concepts while rejecting models of male dominance. Advocates of this shift emphasize the importance of inclusivity, intersectionality, and the practical application of caring values across family, workplace, and educational settings. Much of the Bulgaria-specific empirical information on men's participation in childcare comes from the national MenCare survey (Conkova & Ory, 2016; Ory, 2019; Stoyanova et al., 2014), as well as several qualitative/ethnographic studies (Dimova, 2010). None of these studies explores in detail the link between attitudes and practices of fathers and (non) uptake of PPL.

### **4. The Bulgarian Context**

#### **4.1. Leave Policies and Challenges of Equitable Parenting**

In Bulgaria, parental leave policies provide women with up to 410 calendar days of paid leave, of which 45 days must be taken before the expected date of birth. The first six months of leave are reserved exclusively for mothers. From the sixth month until the child reaches two years of age, the remaining leave may be transferred to the father or a grandparent, but only with the mother's consent. During the first year, leave is compensated at a relatively high level, with income replacement of 90%, followed by a flat-rate benefit of €400 per month in the second year. Job protection upon return from leave is guaranteed by law (Dimitrova et al., 2025). Although the policy is formally gender-neutral in allowing fathers to take leave after the sixth month, in practice, leave-taking remains overwhelmingly concentrated among mothers and is widely referred to as "maternity leave."

The origins of this policy model lie in Bulgaria's socialist legacy. Between the 1950s and late 1980s, women had very high levels of full-time employment (85–90%), and the state supported working mothers through policies such as three months of maternity leave (pre-1986) and two years of leave (post-1986), along with a well-developed childcare infrastructure. However, this dual expectation—that women participate fully in both paid work and domestic care—led to what is known as the “double burden,” with many women experiencing overload, stress, and dissatisfaction.

Following the collapse of socialism in the 1990s, economic instability pushed many women out of the workforce, and traditional family roles reemerged. Today, Bulgaria continues to reflect a familism model (Javornik, 2016), in which caregiving is viewed primarily as a family—often maternal—responsibility. Although parental leave is long and relatively generous, access to public childcare for children under three is limited: Only 17–19% of children in this age group are enrolled in nurseries (National Statistical Institute, 2023).

Bulgaria, along with Romania and Lithuania, fits the caregiver parity model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012), a variant of the male breadwinner model. Although this model provides long and relatively well-compensated parental leave and formally allows fathers to take different types of paid parental leave, including transferred leave, caregiving responsibilities remain predominantly assigned to women. As a result, the model reinforces traditional gender roles by financially supporting mothers' withdrawal from paid employment.

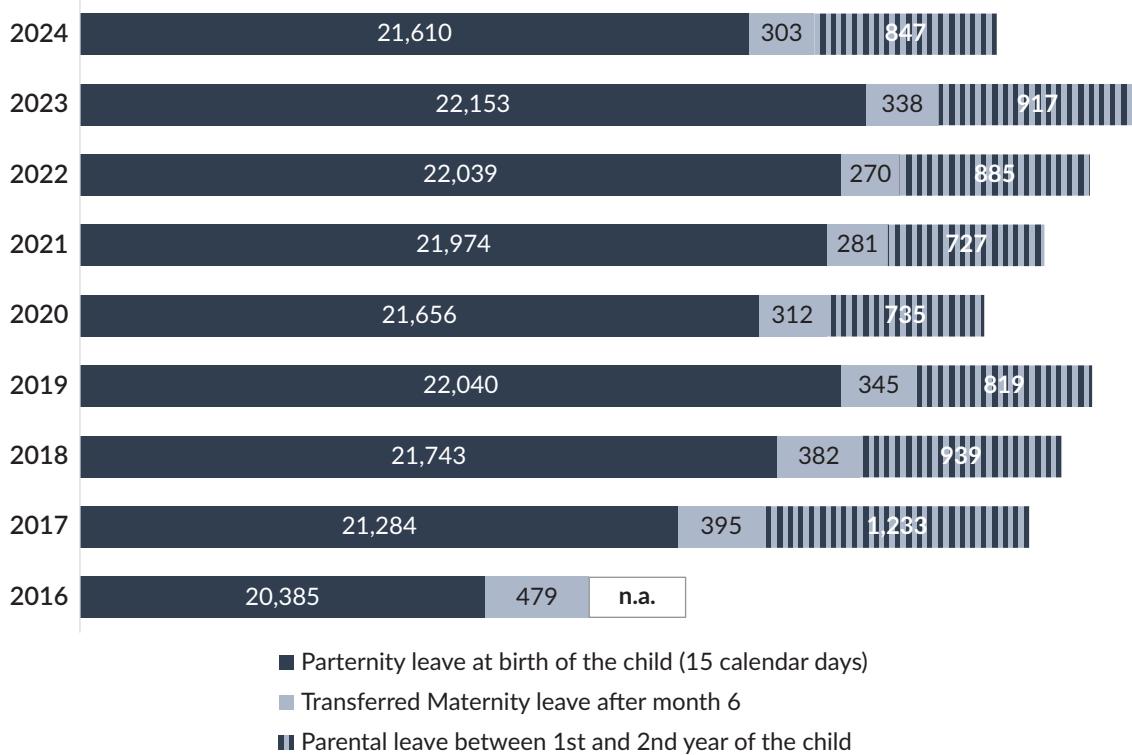
#### **4.2. Opportunities for Leave Uptake by Fathers and Involved Fatherhood**

Under current legislation, mothers in Bulgaria can transfer parental leave to fathers or grandparents after the child's sixth month, up to the age of two. This provision, introduced in the late 1980s, has been underutilized. After Bulgaria's EU accession, a 15-day paid paternal leave for fathers immediately after childbirth was introduced in 2009. The shortest type of paid leave is compensated at 90% of a father's income.

In August 2022, following the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2019), Bulgaria adopted a new two-month non-transferable paid leave for fathers, which can be used at any time before the child turns eight. While this is a step forward, Bulgaria still lacks a “father's quota”—a designated, non-transferable portion of leave specifically reserved for fathers and structured to encourage meaningful engagement. Without this kind of incentive or a “use-it-or-lose-it” model, there is little structural motivation for fathers to take parental leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2015).

Data from the past decade show that paid leave uptake remains low. The 15-day paid paternal leave is the most commonly used, as this is taken by nearly one-third of fathers. Fewer than 1% of fathers make use of transferred parental leave from mothers—available after the child's sixth month—compensated at 90% of the father's income until the first year, and at a flat rate of €400 between the first and second year (Figure 1). The two-month paid paternal leave is used by about 2,000–3,500 fathers annually, but no stable trend can yet be observed, as data are only available from 2023 onward.

Studies from Northwestern European countries demonstrate that the introduction of a father's quota in parental leave policies significantly encourages fathers to take leave and contributes to shifting constructions of motherhood, fatherhood, and broader gender roles (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Salmi &



**Figure 1.** Number of fathers who took up the different types of leave. Source: Dobrotić et al. (2025).

Lammi-Taskula, 2015). Creating more opportunities for fathers to take dedicated time off for childcare also signals to employers and colleagues that fathers should prioritize caregiving responsibilities. Active involvement by fathers during paternity leave is a key mechanism for promoting gender equality and fostering norms of shared parenting (Mauerer, 2025).

In Bulgaria, the introduction of a two-month non-transferable paternity leave in August 2022 was a direct result of aligning Bulgarian labor legislation with European standards. According to Directive 2019/1158/EU, EU member states must ensure that each parent has an individual entitlement to at least four months of parental leave, with two of those months being non-transferable. The rationale behind the Bulgarian amendment to the Labor Code emphasized the father's individual right to leave, independent of the mother's decision, and aimed to improve work-life balance. However, the legislative motives did not reference goals such as advancing gender equality in childcare or enhancing emotional bonding and communication between fathers and their children in early childhood. This contrasts with the Nordic countries, where family policies promoting increased paternal leave uptake are grounded in gender-equality ideologies and a shared sense of child-rearing responsibility (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Nordenmark, 2015).

## 5. The Survey: Sample Descriptives and Methods

The present study is part of the project “Parental Leave Policies and Practices in Bulgaria: A Study on the Attitudes of Parents and Employers to Parental Leave in the Context of Social Inequalities and Social Sustainability”. The self-selected (voluntary response) sample comprises 1,536 mothers and 503 fathers of children aged up to eight who completed an online questionnaire. Data were collected using the

computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method, after sending email invitations to participants and reaching the targeted number of fully completed questionnaires. The questionnaire was developed by the project team, and some question batteries replicate those used in international surveys (e.g., Directorate-General for Communication, 2018), allowing for a comparative exploration of attitudinal trends regarding fathers' uptake of parental leave. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

For this analysis, we focus mainly on the data obtained from the questionnaire completed by fathers. The methods used in the present analysis include descriptive statistical analysis (cross-tabulations and Chi-square test of independence) and binary logistic regression analysis. Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (men sample,  $N = 503$ ).

	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
18–24 yrs	5	1.0
25–35 yrs	115	22.9
36–45 yrs	259	51.5
46–55 yrs	108	21.5
55+ yrs	16	3.2
Total	503	100
<b>Number of children</b>		
1 child	287	57.1
2 children	189	37.6
3+ children	27	5.4
Total	503	100
<b>Partnership status</b>		
Married	246	50.2
In cohabitation	212	43.3
No partner (single/separated/divorced/widowed)	32	6.5
Total	490	100
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Capital and 5 big cities	312	62.5
Big city (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants)	127	25.5
Small town	47	9.4
Village	13	2.6
Total	499	100
<b>Father's ethnicity</b>		
Bulgarian	488	7.4
Non-Bulgarian	13	2.6
Total	501	100

**Table 1. (Cont.)** Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (men sample,  $N = 503$ ).

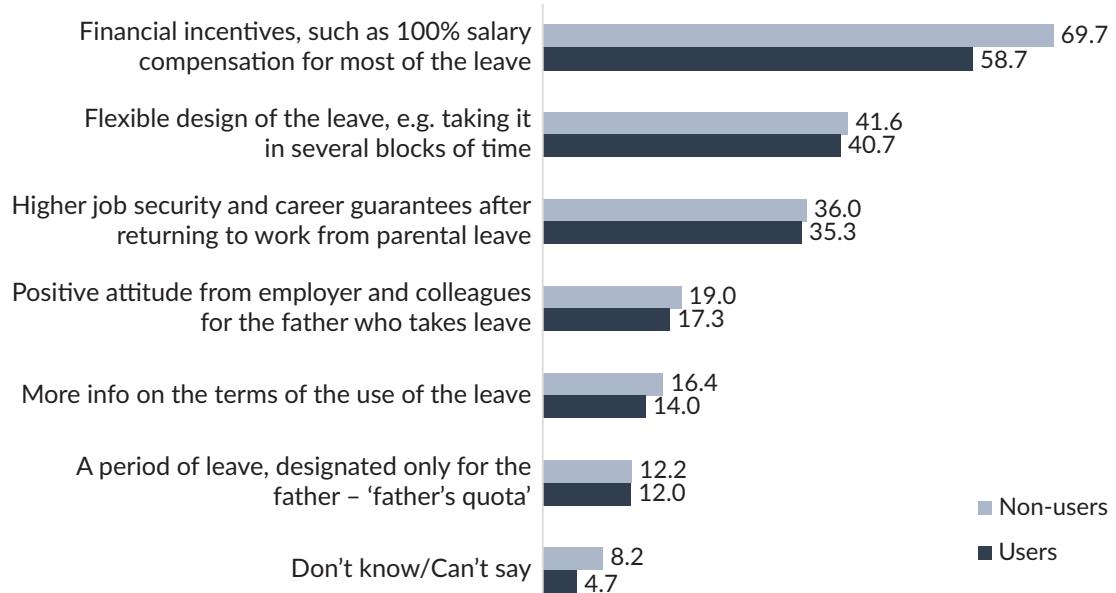
	Frequency	Percent
<b>Father's education</b>		
Secondary or lower	164	32.7
University/college degree	338	67.3
Total	502	100
<b>Mother's employment at birth</b>		
Employed	451	90.6
Economically inactive/unemployed	47	9.4
Total	498	100
<b>Net monthly income of the household</b>		
Below 767 euros	45	9.7
768–1278 euros	94	20.3
1279–1790 euros	124	26.7
1791–2301 euros	85	18.3
2302+ euros	116	25
Total	464	100
<b>Father's use of parental leave</b>		
No	329	65.4
Yes	174	34.6
Total	503	100

Nearly half of the respondents are aged between 36 and 45, the majority hold higher education degrees, most have one child, and most reside in the capital or a major city. Although incidental, the sample includes a relatively large number of fathers who have taken advantage of the transferable parental leave option, i.e., leave initially allocated to the mother but used by the father between the child's sixth month and second year. Specifically, 174 fathers (approximately 14% of the national annual average) reported having used this form of leave. This is a notable feature of the sample because transferable parental leave represents the longest period of paid paternal leave and is solely used by fathers, implying substantial and active involvement in child-rearing during the first two years. Overall, 34.6% of fathers in the sample have taken one or more of the three types of paid paternal leave, allowing for a meaningful comparison between leave users and non-users.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Incentives to Encourage Fathers to Take Up PPL

As was stated above, under the current policy framework, the uptake of PPL by fathers is very limited. The survey aimed to explore the types of incentives that would motivate fathers to use it more and become more involved in childcare during the early years (Figure 2).



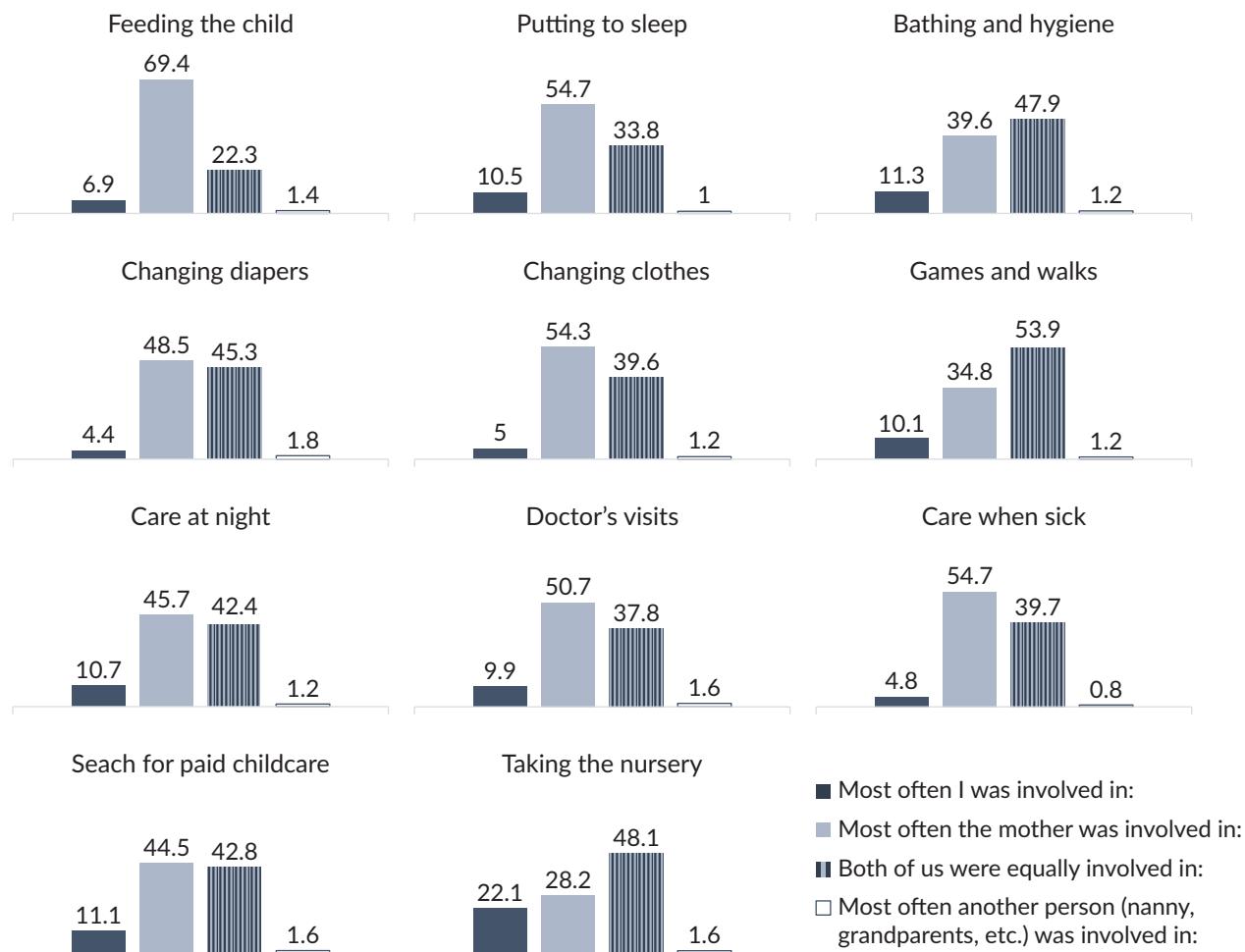
**Figure 2.** What are the most important incentives/motivations to encourage fathers to take up PPL? (up to 3 answers; men sample, N = 503).

The order of preference puts first “financial incentives,” “flexible design of PPL,” and “higher job security and career guarantees,” all of which are based on concerns about the father’s paid work performance. If PPL is to be taken by the father, its design should be different than the current one (used primarily by mothers). It should compensate for income loss in full, allow for non-prolonged absences from work to maintain contact with work, and enhance the guarantees for job security and career opportunities upon returning to work from leave. Underlined here is the importance of the father’s role as the income provider in the family. The subgroup division between users and non-users of PPL does not reveal a different structure of opinions. Both groups prioritize the financial incentive; however, non-users emphasize its importance significantly more frequently. The lower importance of incentives such as disposing of a “father’s quota in PPL” or “being well informed of one’s rights to PPL” also indicates that the father’s role as caregiver is thought of only in the second place after the breadwinning role.

## 6.2. Fathers’ Perception of the Distribution of Childcare

The period around childbirth is crucial for structuring future childcare roles within the family, as these are still not firmly established and there is room for negotiating the traditional earner–carer asymmetry. Figure 3 shows the division of childcare chores within two years after childbirth as reported by the father.

The percentage of fathers who, without the involvement of the mother, do any of the listed childcare tasks is quite low (around 4–11%), with the exception of “taking the child to the nursery,” which is done more often by the father in one out of five cases. The mother is still most often fully responsible for the child’s immediate needs, like feeding, putting to sleep, changing clothes, and taking care when sick, including visits to doctors. However, there are also high percentages of predominantly shared tasks such as “bathing and hygiene,” “games and walks,” and “taking the child to the nursery.” The picture is completed by chores like “changing diapers,” “caring for the baby at night,” and “searching for paid childcare outside home,” which are split between being



**Figure 3.** Within a couple, childcare roles during the first two years of a child (men sample, N = 503).

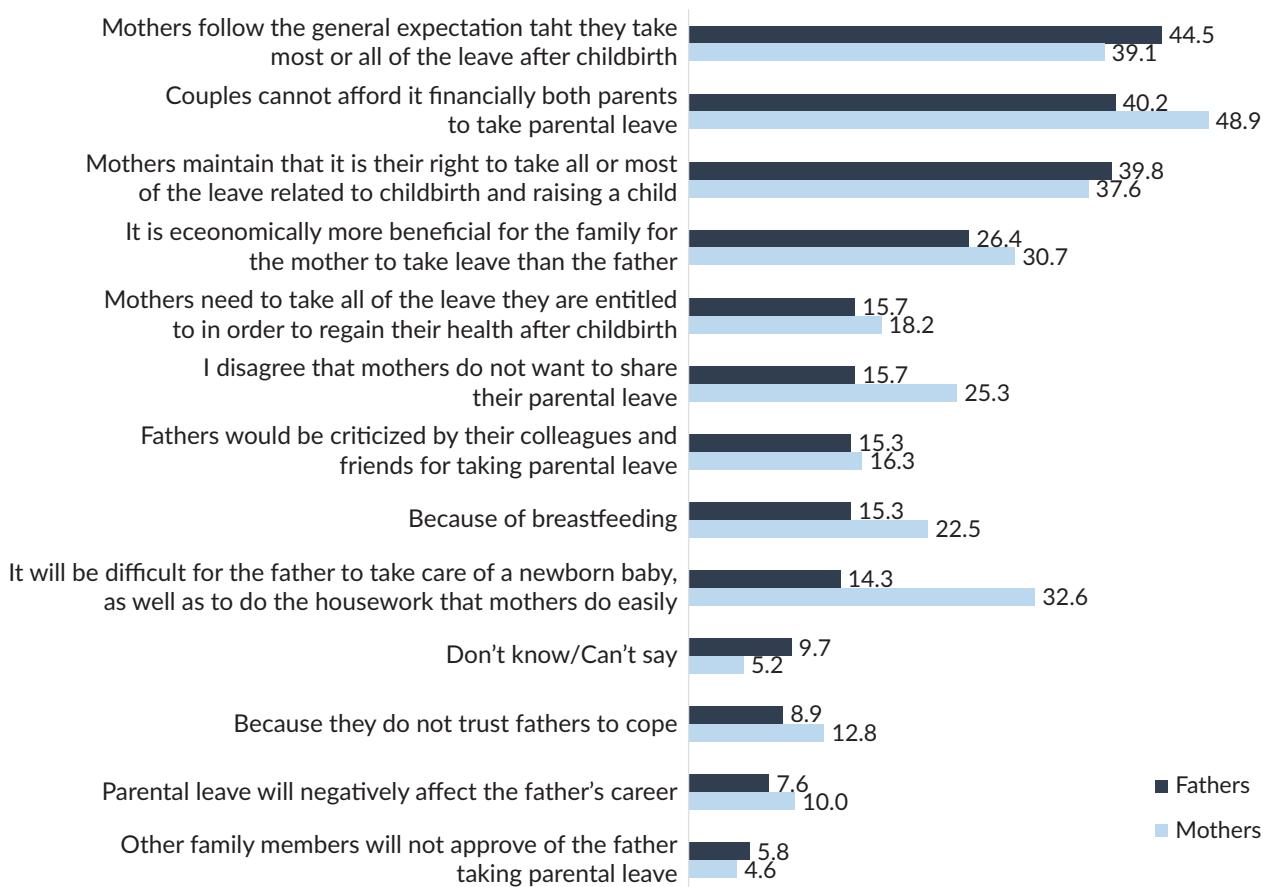
most often only the mother's responsibility and a shared responsibility of both parents. Thus, the day-to-day division of labor in childcare, as seen from the father's angle, is a combination of female-carer and dual-carer role models. Although few fathers in this sample identify as the primary caregiver, they report being more involved in childcare than would be expected under the traditional, fully segregated model of female carers and male breadwinners, and more so than has typically been the norm in past generations.

### 6.3. Fathers' and Mothers' Attitudes on PPL Sharing

The division of PPL between parents is considered a key factor in promoting sustained paternal involvement in childcare. However, the policy context in Bulgaria has long privileged maternity rights and continues to require that mothers consent to the transfer of their entitlements to fathers. In both the male and female surveys, a range of norms and attitudes opposing the equal sharing of PPL was tested to compare gender-specific views on openness to more equal parenting roles.

In Figure 4, we see that the reasons that appealed most to both fathers and mothers are a combination of social norms of motherhood mandate and economic considerations. Firstly, in fathers' views, mothers abide by the cultural norms to become the primary caregiver of a child under two. However, in mothers' views, the primary

reason for not sharing PPL is the economic one—couples cannot afford to reduce the income of both partners and typically choose the lower-paid parent—usually the mother—to take leave. The third reason stems again from gendered rights and roles—mothers maintain that it is their right to take the PPL. Interestingly, the next most frequently cited reasons by mothers reveal a degree of inconsistency in the mother's perceptions of the father's competence to care for a small child. Approximately one-third of mothers express skepticism in father's ability to take care of a newborn ("It will be difficult for the father to take care of a newborn baby, as well as to do the housework that mothers do easily"), whereas about one-quarter report willingness to share PPL with the father which indicates confidence in his capacity to be a primary caregiver. It is noteworthy that only 25.4% of fathers selected either the excluding category ("I disagree that mothers do not want to share their PPL") or the hesitant category ("Don't know"). Selecting one of these two categories automatically made all other options unavailable. This suggests that, for the remaining majority of respondents, mothers are perceived as contributing, for various reasons, to fathers' more peripheral role in childcare by limiting their access to PPL.



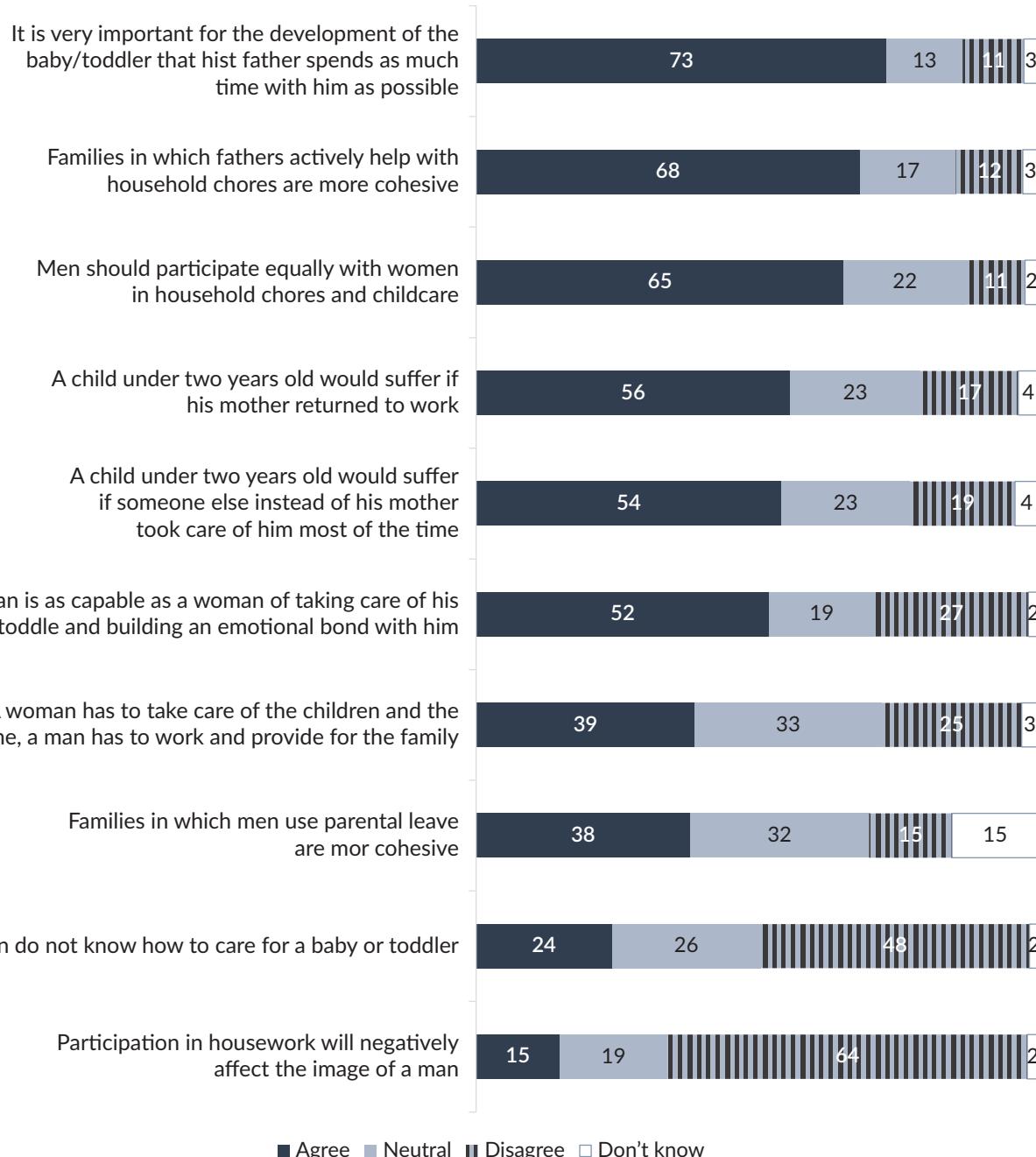
**Figure 4.** Graphic for the question: In your opinion, what is the reason why mothers do not want to share PPL with fathers? Notes: There were up to 5 answers; male sample, N = 503; female sample, N = 1,536.

#### 6.4. Gender Roles Stereotypes

Fathers were asked to respond to 10 statements assessing their attitudes toward egalitarian versus traditional gender norms and roles (Figure 5). The statement that received the highest level of support—approved by 73% of respondents—was: "It is very important for the development of the baby/small child

that his father spends as much time with him as possible." This strong endorsement highlights contemporary fathers' growing awareness of the importance of their involvement in early child development and the quality of the father-child bond.

Men's active participation in household duties was also recognized as a key contributor to family well-being. Two-thirds of respondents (65.4%) agreed with the statement "Men should participate equally with women in household chores and childcare," while 68.2% supported the idea that "Families in which fathers actively help with household chores are more cohesive." These results indicate a significant shift toward shared domestic responsibilities and a more balanced view of gender roles in the family.



**Figure 5. Men's views on gender stereotypes (men sample, N = 503).**

In contrast, traditional gender norms received notably lower levels of support. Roughly 4 in 10 fathers (38.9%) agreed with the male breadwinner model, as expressed in the statement "A woman has to take care of the children and the home, a man has to work and provide for the family." Even fewer (14.9%) believed that "Participation in housework will negatively affect the image of a man," suggesting that the stigma surrounding men's involvement in domestic tasks is weakening.

However, ambivalence remains around the perceived value of paternal leave and men's parenting capabilities. Only 38.0% of fathers agreed that "Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive," reflecting skepticism about the positive impact of paternal leave on family dynamics. Moreover, while 52.1% of respondents affirmed that "A man is as capable as a woman of taking care of his baby/toddler and building an emotional bond with him," and 47.7% rejected the stereotype that "Men do not know how to care for a baby or toddler," conflicting attitudes persist. Over half of the respondents (55.8%) agreed that "A child under two years old would suffer if his mother returned to work," and 54.3% felt that "A child under two years old would suffer if someone else, instead of his mother, took care of him most of the time."

### ***6.5. Social Differences in Fathers' PPL Use or Non-Use***

Based on whether the father used PPL during the first or second year after the child's birth, we create a composite variable with two categories: fathers who used PPL and non-users (the dependent variable in the present analysis).

About the factors associated with the use of PPL by fathers, we test three groups of models. In the first model, we focus on the association between father's (non)use of PPL and sociodemographic characteristics: number of children (having one child vs. two or more children); father's and mother's education (secondary education or lower vs. college or university degree); place of residence (big city vs. small town or village), and average net monthly income of the household separated in two categories (below and above average sample income [1,789 Euro]). In the second model, we include a variable measuring the effect of attitudes towards the use of PPL by fathers. We use the statement "Parental leave is mainly for women/mothers" with a binary response option as an independent variable in the analysis. In the third model, we explore the association between the uptake of PPL by fathers and fathers who work from home in the first two years after the child was born.

As a next step in the analysis, we use logistic regression models in order to study gender stereotypes/attitudes towards involvement in childcare by fathers. The following statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale are dichotomized, combining the options (strongly) agree vs. neutral position (neither agree, nor disagree) and (strongly) disagree: "A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"; "It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"; "Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"; "Families in which men use parental leave are more connected."

For each statement, we apply two sets of models. At first we explore the association between attitudes about men's involvement in childcare and sociodemographic characteristics of fathers: age (18–45 and 46+ years); number of children (having one child vs. two or more children); education (secondary or lower education vs. college or university degree); place of residence (big city vs. small town or village); average net monthly income of the household separated in two categories (below and above average sample income); a binary variable of

father's (non)use of PPL. We also explore the interaction between fathers' education and the use of PPL in a second group of models.

### 6.5.1. Factors Associated With Fathers' (Non)Use of PPL

The results from the multivariate analysis of the factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the child was born are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the birth of the child (men sample).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
<b>Number of children</b>						
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1	
2+ children	0.67	*	0.65	**	0.66	*
<b>Place of residence</b>						
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1	
Small town/village	0.73		0.74		0.75	
<b>Mother's education</b>						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.84		0.78		1.16	
<b>Father's education</b>						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.83		0.84		0.81	
<b>Mother's employment status at birth</b>						
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1	
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	1.31		1.16		1.16	
<b>Average net monthly income of the household</b>						
€0–€1,790 (ref.)	1		1		1	
€1,791+	0.69	*	0.69	*	0.71	
<b>Parental leave is mainly for women/mothers</b>						
No (ref.)			1		1	
Yes			0.24	***	0.26	***
<b>Father works from home in the first two years after birth of the child</b>						
No (ref.)					1	
Yes					1.99	**

**Table 2. (Cont.)** Factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the birth of the child (men sample).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Constant	1.01		1.50		1.36	
N		453		453		453
Log likelihood		-284.71		-268.59		-266.07
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		0.02		0.08		0.09

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Model 1, Table 2 shows that fathers with two or more children are less likely to use PPL than men with one child (reference group). High household income (above the average net monthly income for the sample) is associated with lower odds of PPL uptake by the fathers (reference category: household with net monthly income below the sample average).

Model 2, Table 2 reveals the same dependence concerning the number of children and the average net monthly income of the household. In addition, fathers who agreed with the statement that PPL is mainly for women/mothers are less likely to use it compared to men who disapprove of this statement (reference group).

Model 3, Table 2 adds the effect of work from home by fathers during the first or the second year after childbirth. The effect of the number of children remains significant. The variable measuring fathers' agreement with the statement that PPL is more for women/mothers also remains significant. However, the effect of household income becomes insignificant, while work from home shows a significant positive association with fathers' uptake of PPL.

In brief, the regression in Table 2 indicates that fathers with more egalitarian attitudes and access to remote work are more likely to use PPL, while those with multiple children or from higher-income households are less likely to do so.

#### 6.5.2. Factors Associated With Stereotypes About the Use of PPL by Fathers

The next part of the analysis focuses on the associations between men's stereotypes/attitudes about the use of PPL and childcare. We examine stereotypes that have received higher positive approval (Table 3, Models 1a and 1b and Models 2a and 2b) and stereotypes/attitudes that have been supported by a smaller share of respondents (Table 3, Models 3a and 3b and Models 4a and 4b). We also investigate the relationship between fathers' education levels and the use of PPL, as well as the stereotypes/attitudes associated with PPL and childcare. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample, N = 503).

	"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 4a		Model 4b	
	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	Net effects	Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
<b>Age</b>																
18-45 yrs (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
46+ yrs	1.37		1.37		1.37		1.37		1.12		1.12		1.32		1.32	
<b>Number of children</b>																
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
2+ children	0.66	**	0.66	**	0.58	**	0.58	**	0.99		0.99		0.65	**	0.65	**
<b>Father's education</b>																
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1				1				1				1			
University or college degree	1.24				1.14				1.23				1.65	**		
<b>Place of residence</b>																
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
Small town/village	1.15		1.15		0.69		0.69		0.64	*	0.64	*	1.2		1.21	

**Table 3. (Cont.)** Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample,  $N = 503$ ).

"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
Model 1a Net effects		Model 1b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 2a Net effects		Model 2b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 3a Net effects		Model 3b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 4a Net effects		Model 4b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
<b>Net monthly income of the household</b>															
€0–€1,790 (ref.)	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	1
€1,791+	0.98	0.98		1.2	1.18	0.8		0.81		0.87		0.88			
<b>Use of parental leave</b>															
No (ref.)	1			1		1		1		1		1		1	
Yes	2.22	***		3	***	0.58	**	0.65	*						
<b>Father's education*Use of parental leave</b>															
Secondary or lower & not used parental leave (ref.)		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
Secondary or lower & used parental leave		2.22	**	4.56	***	0.47	*	0.49	*						

**Table 3. (Cont.)** Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample,  $N = 503$ ).

"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
Model 1a Net effects		Model 1b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 2a Net effects		Model 2b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 3a Net effects		Model 3b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 4a Net effects		Model 4b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
<b>Father's education*Use of parental leave</b>															
University or college degree & not used parental leave		1.24				1.61				1.02				1.3	
University or college degree & used parental leave		2.75	**			3.83	***			0.66				0.98	
<b>Constant</b>	0.59	**	0.59	*	1.71	**	1.41		0.48	**	0.53	**	0.85	0.98	
<b>N</b>	452		452		449		449		453		453		386	386	
<b>Log likelihood</b>	-301.76		-301.76		-240.17		-239.24		-242.21		-241.99		-259.17	-259.17	
<b>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.04		0.04		0.06		0.07		0.02		0.02		0.03	0.03	

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

The first model (Model 1a, Table 3) explores the association between different sociodemographic characteristics of the fathers and their stereotypes/attitudes towards the statement "A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them." The results show that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement compared to fathers with one child (reference group). Men who used PPL are more likely to have a positive attitude about a man's capability to care for his baby/small child and build an emotional bond with them compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between father's education and the use of PPL (Model 1b, Table 3) shows that in both groups of men with secondary or lower education and with a college or university degree the use of PPL is associated with a positive attitude about a father's capability to care for a baby or a small child and to establish a warm and emotional bond with them as the mother.

The results presented in Model 2a (Table 3) show that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement "It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time with them as possible" compared to men with one child (reference group). Fathers who used PPL are also more likely to support this statement compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL shows that the uptake of PPL is significantly associated with positive attitudes regarding the importance of the time spent with the child by the father for the development of a warm and emotional bond (Model 2b, Table 3).

The results in Model 3a, Table 3 show that fathers living in small residential places (small towns or villages) are less likely to agree with the statement "Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child" compared to the residents of the big cities (reference group). Fathers who used PPL are also less likely to agree with this statement compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL (Model 3b, Table 3) shows that having experience with PPL is associated with lower odds of men with secondary and lower education agreeing that men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child.

Model 4a, Table 3 shows that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement "Families in which men use parental leave are more connected" compared to fathers with one child (reference group). Fathers with a university or college degree are also more likely to support this statement compared to men with secondary or lower education (reference group). Men who used PPL are less likely to agree about the positive influence of fathers' uptake of PPL on family cohesion compared to those who did not use it (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL shows that men with secondary and lower education who used PPL are less likely to agree that fathers' use of parental leave makes the family more connected (Model 4b, Table 3).

## 7. Discussion

The findings regarding motivations of fathers to take up PPL highlight three key factors: adequate financial compensation for income loss, flexible PPL arrangements, and stronger guarantees for job security and career protection. These preferences indicate that fathers continue to prioritize their role as primary earners, viewing any potential disruption to their employment or income as a significant barrier to taking up PPL. In contrast, softer incentives such as increased awareness of rights or the introduction of a "father's quota" rank much lower in importance. This may reflect a broader societal perception that fatherhood remains closely tied to financial provision, while caregiving is seen as secondary. These attitudes correspond to the results from the

Eurobarometer Work-Life Balance survey (Directorate-General for Communication, 2018), which suggests stability over time. The recent studies from Russia and other Central/Eastern European countries also point out that economic and cultural barriers are primary to father involvement (Bagirova et al., 2024), institutional design and social norms keep care roles limited for fathers (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023), and economic disincentives, cultural expectations, and employer attitudes discourage men (OECD, 2022).

Furthermore, the common belief that mothers are the primary caregivers and primary beneficiaries of PPL reinforces traditional gender norms and limits paternal involvement in childcare (Directorate-General for Communication, 2018; Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

Concerning gender division of care in the early years of the child, the findings show that mothers strongly affirm they are primary caregivers and are still largely responsible for essential, immediate care tasks such as feeding, putting the child to sleep, changing clothes, and caring for a sick child. Some tasks like bathing and hygiene, playing and walking, and taking the child to nursery are more commonly shared between partners. The data also demonstrate a hybrid model of caregiving, with a mix of traditional (female-carer) and more egalitarian (dual-carer) role models, when fathers show some engagement in childcare, though rarely as primary caregivers. This suggests that a gradual shift from traditional norms toward more balanced gender roles in parenting has happened: Compared to traditional male-breadwinner/female-carer models, fathers participating in the survey are more involved in childcare (as self-reported). Previous national data show that fathers are primarily involved in playing or spending time outdoors with their children; traditional views continued to be prevalent, as 66% of respondents in 2014 and 56% in 2021 agreed that fathers lack time or prioritize work over childcare (Eneva, 2022; Stoyanova et al., 2014). The findings on gender role stereotypes reveal a complex and evolving landscape of attitudes toward fatherhood among men participating in the survey. Given that Bulgaria ranks among the countries with a high prevalence of traditional gender stereotypes (Directorate-General for Communication, 2024), the present study suggests growing support for egalitarian views regarding paternal involvement and the sharing of household responsibilities. Fathers increasingly acknowledge the significance of their role in child development and family cohesion. However, persistent doubts about men's parenting competencies and the perceived irreplaceability of mothers in early childhood suggest that traditional norms continue to exert a strong influence. These ambivalent attitudes suggest that, while normative change is underway, it remains incomplete. Targeted policies, sustained public discourse, and workplace reforms that promote paternal involvement—particularly during the early years of a child's life—may be essential for accelerating this cultural shift and normalizing a more active, confident, and equal role for fathers within the family.

The results from the logistic models reveal important social differences in the practices of involved fatherhood related to men's uptake of PPL. Having more than one child is associated with a lower likelihood of fathers using PPL. This result demonstrates the effect of the increased financial need experienced by the "large" families (with more than one child) that may impose the necessity on one of the parents (mostly, the father) to continue working and securing the family income even when there are opportunities to take up PPL. On the other hand, the results also show that higher income is associated with a lower likelihood for men to use PPL. Concerns about income loss and insufficient replacement of the financial compensations received during PPL in the second year, strong work demands, and higher engagement at work of the fathers from affluent households may be a barrier for men to use PPL. Similar findings of existing studies emphasized the effect of income differences between the partners in the household (Ziegler & Bamieh,

2023), men's considerations related to finances when taking the decision to use the leave (Kaufman, 2017), preferences to use a short period of time off for using PPL among disadvantaged fathers due to financial concerns, jeopardy of job place, and family hardships (Pragg & Knoester, 2017), and the gap between salary and the statutory paternity leave in higher paying jobs (Sponton, 2023). On the other hand, the study also outlines specific contextual features of the PPL use in the Bulgarian context, which differ from countries where high-income fathers face less opportunity costs when taking up PPL (Marynissen et al., 2019; Périvier & Verdugo, 2023). In particular, this polarized pattern of PPL uptake by the fathers from households with different socioeconomic status demonstrates that the idea of "involved fatherhood" may collide with the prevailing economic necessity in lower-resource countries like Bulgaria.

We found that the uptake of PPL by fathers is positively associated with gender egalitarian attitudes, rejecting the stereotype that PPL is only for women (Mauerer, 2023). The use of paternity leave is also strongly connected to fathers' gender egalitarian attitudes regarding men's knowledge and capacity/capability to care for a baby or a small child; their capability to establish an emotional bond with the child as mothers; and the positive effect of fathers' involvement in childcare through the use of PPL on family connectedness. The positive association found in the study between the experience with PPL and gender egalitarian attitudes towards men's caring roles in the family is visible among both highly educated men and fathers with secondary or lower education, with some exceptions. In particular, men with secondary and lower education who used PPL are less likely to agree that fathers' use of parental leave increases family connectedness. This result may be related to economic necessity faced by disadvantaged families, which may provoke the need for earlier return to work of the mother and transfer of the leave to the father. In this case, it is not the affirmative attitudes towards "involved fatherhood" but rather the financial needs and concerns about handling household tasks when the baby is newborn that provoke fathers' use of PPL.

The results from the models also suggest that having more than one child may be associated with an accumulation of experience and an increasing need for childcare support, which affects attitudes of fathers about the positive effect of paternity leave, emotional bonding with the child/children, and men's caring capacities. Fathers living in small residential places (small towns or villages) are more likely to have a positive attitude about men's knowledge and capacity to take care of a baby or a small child. Stronger family orientations and more traditional family culture prevailing in small residential places may influence positive perceptions about caring roles and capacities of fathers. These results show that gender attitudes about men's and women's caring roles and "gendered norms and hegemonic masculinity perceptions" (Gheyoh Ndzi & Holmes, 2023) in different spheres of society are strongly connected with the uptake of PPL by men (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Kaufman, 2017).

In a nutshell, our survey results suggest that Bulgarian fathers take part in many childcare tasks, yet deep-rooted traditional attitudes and barriers persist. Although there have been notable shifts in gender roles since the post-socialist transition, the male breadwinner norm remains deeply entrenched. Economic restructuring and the disproportionate impact of job losses on women have reinforced this model. In 2024, Bulgarian men in full-time employment worked an average of 39.6 hours per week, significantly above the EU average of 36.0 hours (Eurostat, 2025). Wage disparities, gendered career opportunities, and limited access to affordable childcare further constrain dual-earner household arrangements and contribute to the continued dominance of maternal leave uptake.

The concept of “hybrid masculinity” provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the evolving attitudes and behaviors of Bulgarian fathers. Hybrid masculinity refers to the incorporation of caregiving, emotional engagement, and nurturing behaviors—traits traditionally associated with femininity—into masculine identities, while still preserving elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as authority and status (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 2018; Demetriou, 2001). Fathers may thus be seen as occupying a transitional position between traditional and emerging masculine roles (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020).

Comparable findings have emerged in studies of Austrian (Mauerer, 2025) and Canadian (Doucet, 2018) fathers, where increased involvement in caregiving coexists with an ongoing prioritization of employment, power, and control. Kaufman (2013) also identifies a range of fatherhood types among Americans: “old dads,” who follow the traditional breadwinner role; “new dads,” who seek to balance work and family life; and “superdads,” who restructure their careers to prioritize caregiving. Bulgarian fathers in the survey reflect a similar intermediate state. Those with access to remote work arrangements are more likely to take parental leave and engage actively in childcare. While remote work can blur the lines between professional and domestic responsibilities, formal parental leave is often viewed as a meaningful opportunity to bond with one’s child. However, such flexibility is typically available only to highly qualified and well-compensated workers, thereby reinforcing existing social and economic hierarchies. As shown from our survey, for these fathers, parental leave serves as a complement to their careers, enabling them to reconcile professional and caregiving roles without compromising their autonomy or occupational standing.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is self-selected (voluntary response) sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings and calls for caution when drawing conclusions about the broader population of fathers in the national context. At the same time, the sample’s bias toward fathers who have taken longer periods of transferable PPL offers a unique opportunity to examine differences between users and non-users. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. Finally, the potential for respondent bias must be acknowledged due to self-reported data and the absence of comparisons with mothers’ perceptions, as fathers are known to over-report their involvement relative to mothers’ reports (Kamo, 2000; Lee & Uzunalioglu, 2025).

## 8. Conclusion

The results of the survey on practices and attitudes of Bulgarian fathers regarding care, PPL, gender role division, and work suggest heterogeneous trends, ranging from the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes to a growing embrace of shared parenting and active paternal involvement in childcare and domestic responsibilities.

From a theoretical perspective, the article applies and expands the concept of “hybrid masculinity” to the Bulgarian context, demonstrating how some fathers combine traditional provider roles with emerging caregiving responsibilities. It highlights how gender norms, institutional structures, and socioeconomic contexts intersect to shape paternal behavior and attitudes, extending theoretical discussions on masculinity and fatherhood in post-socialist societies. It also theorizes an ongoing but incomplete transformation in gender ideologies, emphasizing the coexistence of egalitarian ideals and persistent traditional beliefs.

As a methodological contribution, the study collects primary data through a survey focused exclusively on fathers, rare in this policy domain in Bulgaria. Along with using a combination of statistical methods (descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression models), an interaction analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of how attitudes and behaviors concerning (non)use of PPL vary across sociodemographic groups.

From the empirical standpoint, the study suggests that uptake of PPL among Bulgarian fathers remains low despite the introduction of EU-compliant policies like non-transferable leave. Parental leave reforms somehow align with attitude shifts, but still, a huge gap remains between attitudes and the actual use of leave by fathers. Attitudes toward paternal involvement differ significantly by education, income, and urban/rural residence, reinforcing the importance of the socioeconomic context.

The study also reveals the main factors associated with PPL use: Fathers with egalitarian attitudes and remote work and high-status jobs are more likely to use PPL. The study also demonstrates that the male breadwinner model remains resilient, both among lower-income and middle-income fathers. The empirical data also highlight ambivalent gender role beliefs: While many fathers express support for shared parenting, they also hold conflicting views about the irreplaceability of maternal care.

To support a more inclusive and equitable model of fathers' PPL uptake, policy measures such as improved access to affordable childcare, greater incentives for family-friendly care leaves at the workplace, and workplace flexibility across sectors are essential. Only through such systemic changes can the transition toward shared parenting become more widely accessible and sustainable.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data presented in this study are available on request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions (the data contain sensitive personal information).

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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