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Between Supportive and Involved Fatherhood in Slovenia

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Abstract

The article draws on four qualitative studies of fatherhood in Slovenia performed over 15 years (2005, 2008, 2015, and 2020) to analyse factors shaping the involvement of fathers in child-rearing through a diachronic perspective, situating the empirical findings within broader socioeconomic and policy transformations. The period under study included several ambivalent developments. On one hand, the intensification of work, flexibilisation, and precarious employment added to the primacy of paid work and men's caregiving roles being given limited recognition in organisational cultures. On the other hand, family policy measures—notably the introduction of paternity leave, parental leave reforms, along with other work–life balance reforms—gradually supported fathers taking on greater roles as parents. The findings reveal that by 2005, the traditional model of uninvolved fatherhood was already in decline, giving way to new practices in the form of supportive fatherhood. Although men did participate in childcare and domestic work, their roles were chiefly to assist their female partners. Over time, practices of involved fatherhood also emerged, characterised by more active and egalitarian caregiving. Despite strong aspirations for active participation, empirical evidence shows a persistent gap between ideals and practices. Nevertheless, in Slovenia, fathers are now typically present during pregnancy and childbirth, make use of paternity leave, and engage ever more in everyday childcare, signalling a gradual shift toward the involved fatherhood model.

Keywords

caregiving; domestic labour; family policy; involved fatherhood; labour market; parental leave; Slovenia; supportive fatherhood

1. Introduction

Although often regarded as a recent phenomenon, the roots of involved fatherhood go back further in history. Already in the 19th century, appeals for fathers to participate more in family life and child-rearing accompanied the rise of the modern bourgeois family, precisely in an era when gendered divisions of roles and domestic labour were being consolidated within the patriarchal order (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Švab, 2001). Yet, reinforced through decades of dominant ideology and academic discourse (e.g., Parsons & Bales, 1959), the paternal role continued to be perceived as distant and mediated via motherhood until the 1980s (Rener et al., 2008; Wall & Arnold, 2007). It was then that Western societies faced social changes in family life, such as the pluralisation of family forms, demographic shifts like declining fertility and marriage rates, and rising divorce rates, substantially more women entering the job market, population ageing, and redefinitions of family roles and practices, including changes in fatherhood (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015; Morgan, 2011; Švab, 2001; Williams, 2008). Involved fatherhood has, in turn, attracted sustained research attention ever since. Feminist scholars first highlighted men's growing role in childcare in studies of unequal domestic labour (Hochschild, 1989; Knijn, 1987), linking it to changing notions of masculinity and fatherhood (Segal, 1990). In the 1990s, international research expanded by focusing on cultural representations, paternal identity, men's participation in the private sphere, and work–life balance (Knijn, 1995; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004; Marsiglio et al., 2000; van Dongen et al., 1995). While much of this centred on heterosexual nuclear families, contemporary studies acknowledge that "new" fatherhood also extends to post-divorce, single-parent, re-organised, and LGBTQ+ families (Doucet, 2016; Morgan, 2011; Rener et al., 2008; Stacey, 2006).

Scholars have documented social changes in fatherhood across post-socialist countries as well (Kravchenko & Robila, 2015; Lutz, 2018; Mikulioniene & Kanopiene, 2015; Novikova, 2012; Takács, 2020; Tereskinas, 2022). In Slovenia, late-modern family trends appeared relatively early, already in the 1970s and more evidently in the 1980s and 1990s (Švab et al., 2012). Slovenia, located in Central Europe at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, is shaped by its socialist past when women's employment was vital for economic development and was promoted through education, workplace participation, social provisions, parental leave, childcare, and progressive family legislation (Švab et al., 2012). Yet, like in Western societies (Delphy & Leonard, 1996; DeVault, 1994; Lupton & Barclay, 1997), this did not lead to equal changes in the private sphere in which the traditional gendered division of labour persisted—a phenomenon described as the "stalled revolution" (Hochschild, 1989). Irrespective of the presence of full-time female employment and state support for gender equality, there is little evidence of a radical restructuring of domestic labour, even though these dynamics paved the way for subsequent social changes, including shifts in fatherhood.

Using qualitative data from four empirical studies carried out in 2005, 2008, 2015, and 2020, the article examines the way (involved) fatherhood has developed in Slovenia through a diachronic perspective. All studies focused primarily on heterosexual couples making up two-parent nuclear families with a middle-class background. The article aims to examine how fatherhood in Slovenia has evolved over this period, moving from a supportive to an involved model, and to analyse the factors that foster/hinder this process—including family policies, labour market conditions, cultural norms, and intergenerational practices. By situating empirical findings within broader socioeconomic transformations, the study seeks to increase understanding of how fatherhood is shaped at the intersection of structural frameworks and everyday life, with the findings being relevant for both Slovenia and international debates on parenthood and gender equality. The Slovenian case provides insights into a post-socialist country where progressive gender-equality policies coexist alongside steadfast cultural scripts and workplace constraints.

The following research questions guided the presented study:

> RQ1: What are the characteristics of paternal practices and division of domestic labour in everyday family life and what changes can be detected in the studied period?
>
> RQ2: How have family policies, especially parental and paternity leave, influenced fatherhood practices in Slovenia?
>
> RQ3: How do labour market conditions and workplace cultures enable/hinder fathers' involvement?
>
> RQ4: How do cultural norms and expectations shape fatherhood identities?

The article begins with a short review of research on fatherhood in Slovenia that is followed by an overview of the development of family policy, identifying how policy interventions, notably those from the period of socialism, combined with women's full employment, set the foundations for fathers to become more engaged in family life. The following section presents the methodologies and sample characteristics of the studies. The findings are presented in thematic sections so as to identify the enabling/constraining factors on the way to involved fatherhood becoming more prevalent in society. At the same time, we also adopted a diachronic perspective in order to identify changes across the 15 years, showing how fathers' roles gradually moved from being predominantly supportive towards more involved practices. In presenting findings, the first section addresses the everyday lives of families from the perspective of fathers' involvement in childcare and the division of domestic labour between partners. In the second section, practices regarding work–life balance are examined, with emphasis given to workplace conditions and employers' attitudes to fathers and their caregiving responsibilities, the use of parental leave, etc. In the third section, we show how social expectations of fatherhood changed over the 15-year period, as reflected in fathers' narratives, and how this influences the way they view themselves as fathers. The article concludes with a discussion of the characteristics and development of fatherhood in Slovenia and its future prospects, highlighting the key drivers and barriers to translating involved fatherhood and gender equality into everyday family practices.

2. A Review of Research on Fatherhood in Slovenia

In Slovenia, the topic of fatherhood has attracted greater research interest, especially in the last two decades, with findings generally identifying changes in fatherhood and its pluralisation (Humer & Hrženjak, 2015; Kanjuo-Mrčela & Černigoj-Sadar, 2004; Rener et al., 2008; Robnik, 2012; Švab, 2001; Zavrl, 1999). Research has largely concentrated on the perspectives of involved fatherhood and the impact of paternity leave policies on fathering practices, while more recent studies have examined the relationships between fathering practices and the sphere of paid labour, together with work–life balance (Hrženjak, 2016; Humer, 2016; Humer & Frelih, 2016; Kanjuo-Mrčela et al., 2016; Rener et al., 2005, 2008; Šori, 2016).

Early Slovenian studies detected changes in fatherhood, particularly on both the systemic (following the introduction of paternity leave) and individual levels. On the individual, identity-based level, the move toward involved fatherhood was most evident in beliefs, desires, and values regarding the paternal role, and in fathers being more involved in childcare than previous generations of men had been (Rener et al., 2005, 2008; Švab, 2001; Švab & Humer, 2013).

More recent research stresses the need to examine fatherhood in terms of gender equality (Robnik, 2012) and the relationships between the labour market, different employment forms, and fathering (Hrženjak, 2016), noting that employment conditions and employer sensitivity are relevant factors in fathers' involvement in childcare. Men are rarely recognised at work as holding caregiving roles, as shown in their frequent struggles to reconcile work and family life. Whereas previous studies emphasised that work–life balance issues were faced mostly by women, particularly younger ones (Kanjuo-Mrčela & Černigoj-Sadar, 2004, 2007), the latest research reveals that men, like women, experience difficulties balancing work and caregiving responsibilities (Hrženjak & Humer, 2018; Humer, 2017; Stropnik et al., 2019).

3. The Slovenian Context: Family Policy, Fatherhood, and the Gendered Division of Childcare

It is particularly in the realms of parental leave schemes and early childhood care that family policy provides a key mechanism by which a state can shape gender roles and construct normative understandings of parenthood. States both explicitly and implicitly delineate the boundaries and responsibilities associated with parenthood, motherhood, and fatherhood via these systems (Fodor et al., 2002; Hobson & Morgan, 2002). Extensive research literature demonstrates that family policies, especially paid paternity leave, fatherhood quotas, and responsible fatherhood programmes, have a positive impact on fathers' involvement. Above all, when it is high in quality and consistent, such engagement brings benefits to both children (better development) and the family as a whole (improved relationships and fewer conflicts; André et al., 2025; Huerta et al., 2014).

The Slovenian case is distinguished by its socialist legacy, with the dual-earner model (Lister et al., 2007) having been the dominant model since the 1950s, also given that the low incomes did not allow families to survive on a single (typically male) salary. Upon entering the labour market, women acquired multiple rights: from health, social, and pension insurance to paid sick leave and maternity leave with compensation, as well as having the right to return to their jobs after maternity leave (Burcar, 2015; Tomšič, 1980). Alongside the high level of women in full-time employment, socialism was characterised by the high labour market participation of women with young children. This trend continued in the period after Slovenia gained independence. In 1991, 93% of Slovenian mothers with pre-school children were in employment (Stropnik, 1997, p. 81), and the most recent figures from 2023 confirm this long-standing pattern, with Slovenia recording the highest employment rate of women with children in the EU (87.8%; Eurostat, 2025). Full-time employment of women was supported by the network of public, affordable kindergartens for children aged 1–6 and the robust system of parental leave. Even though the first public kindergartens were introduced in 1946, it was in the 1960s that the system developed substantially (Rener et al., 2006). Between 1971 and 1985, Slovenia invested in early childhood care infrastructure, with 70% of today's kindergartens built during this period (Vojnovič, 1995). In socialism, kindergartens were built through self-contribution, which led to childcare being seen as a "social responsibility," a common good (Burcar, 2015; Jogan, 2001; Tomšič, 1980). Apart from enabling women's full-time employment, kindergartens were also perceived in the context of providing equal opportunities for children's development and thereby eliminating social differences. After developing considerably during socialism, Slovenia's early childhood care system remained and evolved further in post-transition. Public kindergartens are today the dominant form of childcare (87.4% in 2023/2024), with private kindergartens constituting 12.6% of all kindergartens (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2025). Kindergartens are publicly subsidised and accessible to all, with fees determined by family income and assets.

Maternity leave in Slovenia dates back to 1927, when 12 weeks of paid leave were introduced. Paternity leave appeared much later during the socialist period (Korintus & Stropnik, 2011; Windwehr et al., 2022). Until 1975, only maternity leave was available, lasting 105 days, with an additional 141 days allocated to childcare. A major milestone came in 1975 with the introduction of a systemic parental leave policy that included fathers, marking a shift towards more inclusive parental roles. This development followed the example of Sweden, which in 1974 became the first country to legislate paternity leave. In 1975, Slovenia adopted a policy that allowed fathers to take parental leave with the mother's written consent (Korintus & Stropnik, 2011). Fathers were also entitled to 1–3 days of paid leave at the birth of a child, as outlined in collective agreements—provisions that are still currently valid.

In 1986, the parental leave system was extended to a full year, comprising 105 days of maternity leave and 260 days of parental leave (Stropnik & Šircelj, 2008). With minor modifications, the scheme remained in place until 2023. Of note, Slovenia was the first European country to implement 1-year parental leave with 100% wage compensation (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2018).

A pivotal moment in the trajectory of involved fatherhood was the introduction of paternity leave in 2003. Integrated within the broader parental leave scheme and linked to Slovenia's efforts to join the EU, this policy was implemented in three phases: 15 days were granted in 2003, which grew to 45 days in 2004, and extended to 90 days in 2005. Initially, only the first 15 days were paid and had to be taken before the child turned 6 months, while the remaining 75 days were unpaid but included social security contributions. Uptake of the paid portion was high (e.g., 72% of eligible fathers in 2004), whereas the unpaid segment saw limited use, with less than 12% participating by 2007 (Rener et al., 2008).

The 2014 Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2014) reframed parental leave as an individual right, granting each parent 130 days and extending paid paternity leave to 30 days, while abolishing the unpaid part of leave.

Further policy developments followed the adoption of the European Directive on work–life balance for Parents and Carers in 2019, aimed at promoting gender equality in caregiving. As of 1 April 2023, each parent in Slovenia is entitled to 160 days of parental leave (totalling 320 days). Paid paternity leave was reduced to 15 days, albeit fathers now have 75 paid days in total: 15 days of paternity leave plus 60 days of non-transferable parental leave.

Notwithstanding these advancements, gender disparities persist, as shown by fathers' uptake of parental leave, which remains consistently low. Between 1975 and 1990, a mere 1% to 2% of fathers utilised parental leave, with the share falling below 1% in subsequent years before rising to 6–7% in the period 2012 to 2016 (Stropnik, 2020). In 2023, mothers still accounted for 96.4% of those using parental leave, although the fact that the leave is non-transferable prompted increased paternal involvement. By 2024, the proportion of fathers using any form of parental leave had risen to 31%, indicating a positive yet incomplete shift to shared caregiving responsibilities (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2025). These trends suggest that individual, paid, and non-transferable entitlements are essential for encouraging fathers to become more involved (Gíslason, 2006; Jurado, 2021; Kvande, 2015; Langvasbråten & Teigen, 2006).

Data on paternity leave taken in Slovenia between 2008 and 2024, cross-referenced with official birth statistics from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2025), reveal the steadily growing engagement of fathers in the early stages of childcare. In 2008, approximately 78.6% of all fathers (based on the number of live births) made use of the initial portion of paternity leave. This figure gradually rose over the subsequent years, reaching over 85% by 2019, and peaking at 96.5% in 2023 (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2025).

Beyond formal leave entitlements, fathers' involvement in childcare is also demonstrated by their presence at childbirth. In the past 20 years, the share of fathers present at birth has increased steadily, from 60.7% in 2002 to 85.4% in 2023 (National Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Slovenia, 2025).

Yet, in the domain of part-time work due to parenting responsibilities, mothers remain overwhelmingly dominant. Analysis of data for the period 2018–2024 reveals that the proportion of mothers among all beneficiaries ranged consistently between 94.7% and 98.1%, while fathers only accounted for between 1.9% and 5.3%. In 2024, of the total of 21,793 individuals working part-time for reasons of parenting, 21,365 were mothers (98%) and a meagre 428 were fathers (2%; Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2025). These figures show the persistent gendered division of care responsibilities where the burden of reconciling work and family life continues to fall overwhelmingly on women.

Further, the gendered patterns are also shown by data on the division of housework. In 2022, 31.1% of female respondents reported that housework was divided equally, compared to 41.1% of male respondents who indicated the same, while 61.9% of female respondents reported that it was done mostly or completely by themselves, in contrast with 54.6% of male respondents who reported that it was done mostly or completely by their partners (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).

These findings underscore the important role of policy in shaping involved fatherhood, especially when it comes to parental and paternity leaves. While Slovenia has made considerable progress through legislative reform and has been classified as having in place equality-transforming leaves (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020) and policy with defamilialism—supporting women's continuous employment and active fatherhood (Javornik, 2014)—persistent gendered norms, social expectations, and barriers continue to limit fathers' full participation in caregiving.

4. Four Studies on Involved Fatherhood in Slovenia

The article presents an analysis based on four studies on involved fatherhood performed between 2005–2020. Although conducted at different times and varied in thematic emphasis, they all focused on identifying patterns and practices of fatherhood. The data are accordingly sufficiently robust to offer a meaningful overview of the key characteristics of involved fatherhood in Slovenia.

4.1. Methodology and Characteristics of the Research Samples

In this section, information about all four studies is presented. Table 1 displays data about each study and the methodology, while Table 2 presents the sample characteristics for each study.

Table 1. Information about the studies.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Title of the study	New Trends in Family Life: Analysis of Fatherhood and Proposals for Policy in this Field	Ethics of Care, Gender and Family: Processes of the Relocation of Care Between Private and Public Spheres	Fathers and Employers in Action Project	Project Men in Care: Workplace Support for Caring Masculinities
Type of study	Applied research project	PhD thesis	Applied research project	Applied research project
Year	2005	2008	2015	2020
Aim of the study	To identify patterns of fatherhood and the key factors that encourage or hinder the phenomenon of involved fatherhood	To research the processes of relocation of care and care practices within family life (as) between genders and within private and public spheres, with a strong emphasis on childcare	To identify the problems and needs of employed fathers, with a focus on managers and precariously employed workers, in balancing work and childcare	To deepen what is known about the process of involving men in care from the perspective of representatives of a company, men who decided to perform care duties and their partners
Sample size and structure	28 parents with dependent children	36 parents with dependent children	23 fathers of different working situations/positions: 11 managers and 12 fathers in precarious types of work, all with dependent children	22 interviews: 14 interviews with men with caring responsibilities in 4 different companies and 8 interviews with female partners, all with dependent children
Methods	Focus groups (five)	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews
Institution and project leader	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana Leader: Dr. Tanja Rener	PhD thesis from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana	Project coordinator: The Peace Institute Leader: Dr. Živa Humer	Project co-ordination: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) Leader: Professor Teresa Jurado Project coordinator in Slovenia: The Peace Institute National leader: Dr. Živa Humer
Funding	Research Agency of the Republic of Slovenia and the Office for Equal Opportunities of the Republic of Slovenia	—	Norwegian Financial Mechanism Programme (2009–2014)	European Commission, EaSI-PROGRESS

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the samples.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Sample	Parents with dependent children	Parents with at least one pre-school child	Fathers in management positions and fathers in precarious jobs	Fathers with caring responsibilities and their female partners
Sample size	28	36	23	22
Men	14	16	23	14
Women	14	20	—	8
Average age	32	31.2	41	39.5
Children				
One	14	19	6	8
Two	11	15	12	11
Three	3	2	3	2
Four or more	—	—	2	1
Age range of children	3 weeks–13 years (majority of pre-school children)	5 months–6 years	2–21 years (mostly school children)	1–22 years (mostly school children)
Employment status	28 employed	34 employed and 2 unemployed	22 employed and 1 student	21 employed and 1 unemployed
Education				
Elementary school	1	2	—	2
Secondary school	12	13	9	11
University	13	15	10	9
MA or PhD	2	6	3	—
Place of residence				
Larger city	12	20	11	4
Smaller city or town	8	6	10	10
Rural area	8	10	1	8

For this article, we analysed the collected data using the method of thematic coding, applying an inductive approach. With this approach, categories and codes were developed based on the empirical material itself, and simultaneous coding, in which individual units of text, especially longer ones, can be relevant from multiple perspectives, and are thus assigned several different codes simultaneously.

5. Results

5.1. Everyday Family Life and Paternal Practices: The Gendered Division of Domestic Labour

5.1.1. From Assistants to Equal Partners?

Despite men being increasingly more involved in domestic labour, especially in childcare, gender differences exist in various aspects and can be seen in practices as well as perceptions.

One of the most obvious findings in all four studies was the perception that men's involvement in domestic labour is often framed as assisting their partner (Hochschild, 1989; Nentwich, 2008). This was seen in the stories not only through the practices described by the participants, but in the language itself as well:

> I do everything, but my wife really needs to tell me. Usually, I do the dishes, vacuum, take out the trash, and she does the laundry, ironing, and that stuff. With the kids, I help constantly by changing diapers, feeding, and even getting up at night. (Tine, Male, 37, Study 4)

Fathers often see their role as supporting their partner, enabling her to complete housework or similar tasks, which also indicates the gendered division of labour. They act as helpers or "outsiders," stepping in when needed, but domestic labour and especially caring for children is a woman's task (Rener et al., 2005, 2008):

> Yeah, in my case, when the two of us are playing, my wife uses that time to do the housework. (Klemen, Male, 30, Study 1)

Although this perception is persistent and present in all four studies, the last study, especially, revealed shifts in both perceptions and practices concerning more involved fatherhood. Nonetheless, this is not principally grounded in the ideal of equal division of labour or gender equality but in a pragmatic organisation of responsibilities largely aimed at achieving work–life balance, given that both parents are employed. The partners must coordinate and negotiate to successfully manage all of their responsibilities, as Tine described:

> My wife starts to work at 5:30 a.m. so she can pick up the children from kindergarten by 2:30 p.m. I start at 9 a.m., so we can't commute together. Yes, of course, I decided to get involved when the child was born because there was no other way. Sure, it was hard at first, getting used to it, but you must, there's no choice. It can't all fall on the woman, so you must help….That's why we agreed she works mornings and I work afternoons. (Tine, Male, 37, Study 4)

From a diachronic perspective, it is thus clear that the number of fathers who are actively involved and share domestic labour tasks more equally with their female partners is rising, and this model was more evident, especially in the last study, where some fathers reported practices of involved fatherhood, such as Jure:

> I see myself as part of the family and have been actively involved from the start. For all the children, we divided the parental leave. I took the last part of the parental leave for a month or two: with the first child, I took two months, with the second, three months, and now with the third, I'll only take one month. (Jure, Male, 38, Study 4)

In Slovenia, there is also a growing number of fathers who are single parents after divorce, which is another indicator of changing patterns in fatherhood. These fathers assume full responsibility for the care of their children, as illustrated by Marjan's account:

> I prepare breakfast for the girls, they pack their own bags for half an hour, and after practice, sometimes we need to tackle a more demanding math problem. Every day I cook lunch or dinner, depending on what we call it, since we get home around 5 p.m. because of their training. They go to bed a bit after

> 9 p.m. We also have a special bedtime ritual: I either tell them a story, a fairy tale, or I write a motto or a daily thought on the board in their room, and we talk about it, think a bit, and have a short discussion. (Marjan, Male, 47, Study 4)

5.1.2. Motherhood as Primary Parental Role and Its Consequences for Paternal Involvement

Parenting puts gendered caregiving practices in the spotlight: male care is seen as socially constructed, while female care is perceived as natural (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). This is linked to the social construction of motherhood as the primary parental role (Rener et al., 2008; Wall & Arnold, 2007), grounded in the biological and reproductive features of the female body, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, which in turn lead to greater maternal involvement in childcare immediately after birth and in the early stages of the child's life. Fathers, by contrast, tend to engage more actively in childcare at a later stage, typically when interaction becomes centred around play and, in particular, once the child begins to speak:

> When the child is small…my role in the first five or six months is very secondary….Now it's changing, the child is starting to communicate and parental roles are changing. Now it's different, when there is a response, my response is also different. (Bojan, Male, 40, Study 2)

Men's participation is consequently often visible in leisure, more enjoyable, less routine, and educational caregiving activities (such as talking, reading, listening, playing, etc.; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Hochschild, 1989; Rener, 1993; Rener et al., 2008; Švab, 2001). Brandth and Kvande (1998) also established that men's caregiving is largely associated with activities outside the home, including promoting independence, teaching skills, and interacting with the external world:

> Like I said, sometimes we draw, look at books. But what lasts the longest is building with Lego, making castles. She always wants mine because she likes it better. (Simon, Male, 36, Study 1)

> I take her to basketball games; now that she's older, she almost always comes with me….We read books and cuddle while mum cooks….I taught her to count, and I try to be educational in parenting….We go for walks with the dog, and we talk a lot because she wants everything explained. (Luka, Male, 35, Study 2)

Men also benefit from joint activities and time therapeutically spent with children (Bailey, 2015; Švab, 2001):

> When I come home, I'm 100% present for two hours. It relaxes me and gives my partner a break. (Borut, Male, 40, Study 2)

In contrast, women perform more direct and repetitive caregiving tasks (physical activities like nurturing, feeding, bathing, dressing, etc.):

> Basically, my wife handles most of the stuff with the kids. In the morning, she dresses them, changes them, packs their things, and in the evening, it's pyjamas, brushing teeth, and bedtime. She mostly takes care of that. (Simon, Male, 36, Study 1)

Mothers more often combine domestic and childcare tasks (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Hochschild, 1989; Rener et al., 2008), which also involves skill transfer, although that is rarely recognised as educational. Such simultaneous caregiving is typical of mothering, while men engage in direct, segmented care (Craig, 2006):

> My wife can manage to do something while also keeping an eye on the little one and guiding them in play, or step away for five minutes and come back, whereas that kind of multitasking just throws me off. (Marko, Male, 40, Study 1)

Gender differences in the division of domestic labour are also observed in terms of time organisation.

Men tend to take on tasks that are less time-bound or more flexible, whereas women handle those that must be done at specific times:

> I'd put it this way: I do spend quite a bit of time with the child, but because of the pace of life, I'm unfortunately often absent. Still, there are definitely moments when I find time to play with him. (Andrej, Male, 31, Study 1)

Men have greater flexibility negotiating when and at which tasks they will be involved and their engagement in childcare is more optional than women's:

> It also depends on my other commitments. For example, my employer offers a lot of training, and those online courses often take place in the afternoon. (Jernej, Male, 33, Study 1)

Men also tend to involve themselves more when work–life balance becomes important, i.e., when their partner goes back to work after taking parental leave, which also confirms pragmatic reasons for more equal division of domestic labour:

> Later, when she returned to work, we started dividing things more equally. (Glavca, Male, 36, Study 3)

While gender differences are seen in parenting practices, the studies show the emotional aspect of caregiving is increasingly shared, albeit fathers struggle with expressing emotions due to the traditional ideals of masculinity that emphasise strength and restraint (Knijn, 1987; Seidler, 1997). Seidler (1997) argues that caregiving involves learning a new form of masculinity. In patriarchal systems, men are socialised to be independent and rational, as opposed to caregiving roles. Care is not a natural female trait, but a socially constructed practice tied to marginalised groups, notably women (Tronto, 1993):

> My wife and I play with our child very differently. She is much more emotional, takes more time. I saw the same with my mother. Maybe it's a male–female thing, I don't know. They are much more involved. But now, he has gotten under my skin; the little devil cuddles with me. I'm spoiling him too. I used to resist, but now it hurts me when he cries. And it feels good when he jumps into your arms, you can't resist. (Dare, Male, 33, Study 2)

5.1.3. The Role of Kinship Support Networks

In Slovenia, kinship-based support networks are a cultural particularity, with grandparents, especially grandmothers, playing a vital role in assisting their children's families through both childcare and other forms of material and service-based support (Rener et al., 2006, 2008; Švab, 2001), which is confirmed by all four studies. Even though these patterns are rooted in tradition, kinship support remains very significant for parents today since it facilitates work–life balance. However, from a gender equality perspective, such networks may hold unintended consequences: while easing work–life balance, they also reinforce transgenerational gendered care as caregiving is transferred from mothers to grandmothers rather than being redistributed equally between parents.

A recent study on grandparenting (Mihalinec, 2025) revealed that a gendered division of labour persists among grandparents as well. Grandmothers typically engage in cooking and various household tasks alongside caregiving, yet grandfathers are more likely to play with grandchildren, drive them to activities, and participate in leisure-oriented tasks. This is also observed in the empirical studies:

> Her mother helps us a lot, which is great. When we come home, lunch is ready, the kids are changed and happy. (Rok, Male, 31, Study 2)

> Since we still have the grandmothers, we can call them ad hoc if needed. Even at two o'clock, so they can come by four. That makes things a bit less of a problem. (Mare, Male, 40, Study 3)

One factor is certainly financial. Informal care provided by relatives and friends is unpaid. Parents do not pay for this care and instead show gratitude through gifts or shared expenses:

> It saves us money. Grandma is here because she enjoys it. We give her small gifts, and recently we promised her a massage. (Rok, Male, 31, Study 2)

Parents typically resort to paid childcare only when grandparents or other members of their social networks are unavailable. The main reason for this is financial:

> When the kids were little, we had a babysitter three times a week so I could actually get something done. Financially, it didn't really pay off, but it was necessary to stay in business. Babysitters are expensive. (Zvonko, Male, 36, Study 3)

Care work provided by grandparents or other relatives is also perceived as a "labour of love," that is, not to be paid for because it is rooted in emotional ties and mutual obligations. Unpaid grandparental care also reflects intergenerational care dynamics, according to which parents feel responsible for their ageing parents who once cared for them, and grandparents expect support in return (either physical or emotional).

5.2. Work–Life Balance, Employers' Attitudes, and Workplace Conditions

5.2.1. The Role of Paternity Leave and Involved Fatherhood

While discussing work–life balance, a steadfast pattern of gender-specific roles and labour division is also observed: this reconciliation is still largely perceived to be an issue for women (Hochschild, 1989; Kaufman, 2013; Nentwich, 2008), even though men are participating ever more in the process.

One of the earliest notable shifts observed already in the first study came with the introduction of paternity leave. This policy was well received by parents from the outset, and the share of fathers taking advantage of it has grown steadily. Marko stated:

> When it comes to taking paternity leave, the more common reaction would be "you're not taking it?" rather than "did you take it?" It would almost seem strange not to. (Marko, Male, 40, Study 1)

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that at least the initial portion of the leave, right after the child's birth, was too short. The need for longer paternal leave following the birth of a child was already detected in the first study, where participants mentioned that such leave is often combined with several days of regular annual leave by fathers, thereby extending the period in which they can remain at home:

> In our case, yes, that's mostly how it goes; they usually add 14 days of annual leave, so they end up spending a whole month at home together. (Andrej, Male, 29, Study 1)

Although fathers do support their partners during this time, they sometimes simultaneously continue to fulfil their work-related obligations in the first part of paternal leave:

> Yeah, I took the leave….I stayed at home and worked from home, and then my wife and I sort of shared the childcare duties. As an entrepreneur, it's like, even the leave I did take, I couldn't really use it as proper time off. I couldn't just disconnect completely from work. (Glavca, Male, 36, Study 3)

Moreover, the first study showed that even though men participated during the paternal leave, the division of labour immediately went back to the traditional gendered pattern after returning to work (Bailey, 2015):

> Right after the birth, he did everything regarding the household, everything while I took care of the baby. When he was at home, he sometimes even woke up in the middle of the night and gave her a bottle, but after he went back to work [after the paternity leave], he never did it again. (Milena, Female, 35, Study 1)

5.2.2. Gendered Patterns in Work–Life Balance

All four studies showed that men tend to prioritise their work responsibilities and career progress (Gerson, 1997; Ranson, 2001), whereas women, conversely, adapt their work commitments and career trajectories to family-related responsibilities:

> I would like to spend more time with my family, but on the other hand, I'm very ambitious. For me, private and career life is one, it's mine. Family life is family life, and I know how important it is for my wife, how important it is that we're together. She told me that the first day and I respect that, and I also gave a commitment when we got married. When we met, she asked me if I intend to work 24 hours a day. I told her no, but that I intend to work a lot, and I try to stick to that. (Dare, Male, 33, Study 2)

Career especially takes priority when fathers occupy managerial or leadership positions, with the result being that family responsibilities are largely assumed by their female partners:

> My wife spends most of the time with our daughter, you know, dealing with homework, after-school activities, managing the schedules and so on. I'm more out of the loop there. I mean, I do know what's going on, but precisely because I'm at home less, I'm definitely not as involved in that part. (Kristofer, Male, 43, Study 3)

5.2.3. Practices of Taking Sick Leave for Childcare

There are some changes seen across the four studies with regard to taking sick leave to care for a sick child. While in the first study, sick leave was primarily taken by women, and a lack of understanding from employers concerning fathers taking leave to care for a child still dominated, the fourth study in particular indicated certain positive developments:

> It's always me who takes sick leave for the child, because, I don't know, it's somehow self-understood that he cannot take leave as he works in a private company. (Nina, Female, 33, Study 1)

> At our place, it's not a problem if the child has a fever. You call in the morning and say you're on sick leave to care for the child, and that's it. I'm not the only one who does this, we all do, it's one this time, another next. There's no issue, no one looks at you badly, because everyone understands a child can get sick in a minute. (Matej, Male, 39, Study 4)

Still, there were also examples of negotiating, as described by Maja in Study 1, about who is to take sick leave to provide care for a child:

> Well, at the beginning, my husband expected, of course, that it would be me who would take sick leave for the child. But as I was constantly on sick leave, my boss said, "let him take sick leave"….So, after this, we divided this. (Maja, Female, 32, Study 1)

All four studies reaffirmed that it is now even more common that work-related obligations mean that neither parent takes sick leave for a child, and instead grandmothers step in to provide the support needed:

> We don't take sick leave for the children, because we have access to a "grandma service." To avoid disruptions at work, we leave them in the care of their grandmother. (Uroš, Male, 40, Study 3)

5.2.4. Employers' Attitudes and Their Growing Awareness of Fathers as Caregivers

While employers often do not recognise men as carers and thus, they remain invisible in the workplace in this sense (Bailey, 2015), some progress has been observed on the side of employers. In Study 4, for example, parents reported having experienced a more supportive attitude from employers, as Smilko and Jure noted:

> My partner and I share caregiving duties. We have an agreement: she drops off the child at kindergarten in the morning, and I pick him up in the afternoon, by 3:30 p.m. If something urgent comes up at work, we talk and she'll leave work early or vice versa. If she needs to be in earlier, I'll come in later. No problem, we always find a way, and the managers are understanding. (Smilko, Male, 35, Study 4)

> If I ever need a day off or vacation because of the kids, I always get it; there's never been a problem, we always figure it out. (Jure, Male, 38, Study 4)

Changes in employers' attitudes are partly related to the growing awareness among employers of the importance of work–life balance as a key factor in terms of productivity. Victor from Study 3, who was also the manager in his company, referred to this, yet his statement also reveals that (at least in part) work–life balance was seen as more of a woman's issue:

> We don't have the classic system of assigning workloads. We have responsibilities, everyone knows their job and duties, and there's a great deal of flexibility. We don't track hours or workdays, and when it comes to things like leave, it's more or less relaxed. If someone needs to step out or take care of something, we try to be as flexible as possible. Because if someone can successfully manage all their family obligations at home, they'll definitely be more effective and focused at work. That's why we promote flexibility. (Viktor, Male, 54, Study 3)

5.2.5. Involved Fathers "at Work": Negotiating Care and Career

Some fathers challenged the traditional workplace norms by reducing their work hours, changing jobs, or restructuring their careers to prioritise their involvement in the family (Kaufman, 2013). The importance of work–life balance was also expressed by fathers themselves in Studies 3 and 4; namely, an aspect that at least the first two studies did not detect to any great extent. For example, Jure in Study 4 changed his workplace from a special police unit to traffic police to make his work–life balance easier:

> When it comes to the kids, this suits me well. I have three young children, and it is much easier to balance work and family. Only when I have 12-hour day shifts, I can't help at all, with school or pick them up from kindergarten. But otherwise, I can. Even when I work night shifts. (Jure, Male, 38, Study 4)

Similarly, Smilko, Uroš, and Mark also described the importance of work–life balance, in particular the importance of having time for family:

> Right now, what means the most to me is flexible working hours. If I had to work until 4 p.m., I couldn't pick him up from kindergarten at 3:30. (Smilko, Male, 35, Study 4)

> Actually, I could work much more than I do…and I could also earn significantly more money if I were much more engaged professionally than I currently am. But the role of fatherhood means so much to me that I don't want to neglect my family just for the sake of working late into the night. (Uroš, Male, 40, Study 3)

> My professional life changed completely, 100%, because of my daughter. I used to work 12 to 16 hours a day, always away from home, with irregular hours, including weekends, holidays, and nights. I deliberately found a job with fixed hours, from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., so I could have the afternoons for myself and my child. I work until 3, then pick up my child from kindergarten and spend the afternoon on the playground. It was a conscious decision to change jobs. I now earn half as much as before, but I did it to be as present and available for my child as possible….For me, balancing work and family is not a problem. (Mark, Male, 46, Study 3)

Nevertheless, social class differences were also visible. Fathers holding precarious employment often reported constraints on taking leave or negotiating flexible arrangements, while managerial fathers experienced cultural expectations to prioritise work and career, which limited their actual involvement at home. Both overwork in managerial positions and lack of entitlements in precarious employment restrict fathers' capacity to engage in childcare, albeit through different mechanisms.

5.3. Changes in Social Expectations Regarding Fatherhood and Paternal Identity

All four studies show that over the 15-year period, social expectations related to fathers being actively involved in childcare were gradually becoming more and more explicit. "Fathering in contemporary societies requires men to be simultaneously provider, guide, friend, playmate, carer and nurturer" (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015, p. 354), and paternal involvement is no longer merely socially desirable, but is increasingly expected (Kaufman, 2013). The described shift was already identified in the first study that, among other findings, noted a transformation in media representations of fatherhood toward the image of the involved father (Rener et al., 2008), with subsequent studies confirming this trend, which is also present in other countries (Kaufman, 2013):

Active involvement of fathers in childcare as socially expected behaviour was explained by Igor:

> For example, being present at birth has become standard practice for young men….Today it is more unusual not to be present at the birth than to be there. (Igor, Male, 35, Study 3)

In an informal network of friends, a man actively involved in everyday childcare routines, especially care, might even be mocked because that is not part of masculinity. It seems the boundaries of masculinity are moving towards accepting emotional and caregiving roles within the framework of what are considered socially acceptable and less acceptable forms of equal fatherhood:

> Once a friend hinted that I was kind of overdoing it and disrupting the system, like, men changing diapers…peeing is okay, but not poop…so later, when our partners were talking about what each of us does, one guy told me I should take it a bit easier because his wife hears everything I do and he doesn't do any of that. But generally, it seems most men I hang out with are very engaged. And they do

> intimate care; I find that completely normal. Even nowadays, if you are not present at birth, you're the weird one. A few years ago, it was weird to be. So, this is definitely changing. (Igor, Male, 35, Study 3)

This indicates that changes are present on different levels, in social perceptions of fatherhood, informal networks, and work environments, as was observed by Marjan in Study 4:

> For example, my personal experience is that 14 years ago, when my daughters were born, I used the parental leave. I was on parental leave for three months for my daughters. They were born prematurely, so we got some extra leave as parents. My former partner worked in the private sector and had to return to work early because it was in her employer's interest. In the end, I stayed at home for the first seven months, also because I had an injury and a cast. I was with my daughters for the first seven months. That shows in our relationship today….At that time, people asked me: "Are you crazy? Why are you doing this? Let her go instead"….But now, there's less of that kind of thinking. (Marjan, Male, 47, Study 4)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The four studies conducted over 15 years highlight the complex interplay of policy advancements, societal norms, and individual practices. Despite significant reforms—particularly the introduction and extension of paternity and parental leave—persistent gendered divisions in caregiving remain. The supportive model of fatherhood, whereby fathers assist mothers rather than share responsibilities equally, remains dominant. This model is reinforced by cultural norms that associate caregiving primarily with women and by workplace structures that often fail to accommodate men's caregiving roles. Nevertheless, Studies 3 and 4 observed a perceived shift towards increased paternal involvement in childcare. Such changes tend to occur more within the private sphere of the household than in the realm of paid work. Notably, contextual factors—such as a partner's working hours or professional position—often prompt adjustments. The studies underline the importance of policy in driving change.

The high uptake of paternity leave immediately after childbirth shows fathers are willing to engage in caregiving when supported by institutional frameworks. However, the limited use of parental leave by fathers and the continued reliance on mothers for routine and time-bound care tasks indicate that deeper cultural and structural barriers remain in place. Such barriers include traditional gender roles, workplace inflexibility, and the perception of motherhood as the primary parental role and caregiving as a secondary responsibility for men.

Our analysis demonstrates that the diachronic perspective has been underutilised in prior research: over the 15-year period, fatherhood in Slovenia has shifted from being seen as supportive to increasingly expected as involved, although practice still lags behind the aspirations. The limits of the gender mainstreaming paradigm are evident: while EU-driven policies created entitlements, cultural scripts and workplace norms continue to privilege maternal caregiving and marginalise fathers' roles, especially in cases of sick leave or part-time work.

Participants frequently emphasised the emotional and therapeutic benefits of father–child interaction, suggesting that involved fatherhood enriches family dynamics and challenges traditional masculinities. Still,

persistent gendered caregiving practices remain, as mothers typically handle repetitive, time-bound tasks, while fathers more often engage in flexible or leisure-oriented activities.

The role of extended family, especially grandmothers, further complicates this dynamic as it often redistributes care among women rather than between partners. While easing work–family reconciliation efforts on the one hand, this culturally embedded practice, on the other, perpetuates transgenerational gendered care and poses an obstacle on the path to involved fatherhood.

The data confirm that employers' attitudes and workplace conditions are critical factors. While some progress has been made with acknowledging the importance of work–life balance, many workplaces continue to prioritise career advancement for men and flexibility for women, reinforcing traditional divisions, defining work–life balance as a problem of women.

The development of fatherhood in Slovenia reflects a tension between progressive policy measures and entrenched cultural norms. While involved fatherhood is increasingly socially expected and supported by family policy, achieving gender equality in caregiving requires addressing deeper structural and cultural barriers to be addressed. Policies must go beyond leave entitlements to challenge workplace norms, promote flexible work arrangements for both genders, and foster cultural shifts that value caregiving as a shared responsibility.

In addition, the main obstacle to involved fatherhood today is mainly linked to employment and the demands of the labour market. With its imperative of the independent, self-reliant employee, the neoliberal labour market brings insecurity into employment and work–life, affecting both men and women (Hearn & Pringle, 2006). The labour market situation introduces precarity and greater exposure to unemployment. Experiences with employment and the labour market, the sense of job security, and the availability of alternative income sources prove to be the factors that most strongly influence fathering practices, much more so than class, ethnicity, education, or even personality traits (Ranson, 2001). In this respect, family life is entirely subordinated to professional life, not simply for men but for women too, yet it remains a major obstacle to changing the gendered division of domestic labour (Rener et al., 2008).

Although this article brings new insights into the phenomenon of fatherhood in Slovenia through a diachronic perspective, it has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies on data from four qualitative research projects that were not originally designed as parts of a coherent longitudinal study. The comparability of samples is accordingly limited, even though the research designs of each study were similar and oriented to detecting characteristics in fatherhood in recent years. Second, while the diachronic perspective reveals important shifts between 2005 and 2020, the analysis is based exclusively on qualitative research, and the findings therefore cannot be generalised to the broader population of fathers in Slovenia. They provide insight into experiences and practices rather than representative trends. Moreover, since they focus largely on fathers from the middle-class, heterosexual nuclear families, they cannot capture the full diversity of fatherhood experiences in Slovenia, such as potential differences by region, ethnicity, family form, etc. Third, the latest study included dates from 2020, which means that more recent developments—such as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the division of care—are not captured. These limitations indicate the need for future research to build on longitudinal and comparative designs able to more comprehensively address the complexity of fatherhood practices.

Future studies should examine the long-term impacts of non-transferable parental leave and the role of employers in enabling or hindering paternal involvement. Interventions targeting cultural perceptions of masculinity and caregiving could help bridge the gap between aspirations and practice. Although the path toward more extensive involvement remains ongoing, the foundation laid by policy reforms, shifting social expectations, supportive employers, and the example of a still small but growing group of actively engaged fathers provides grounds for cautious optimism.

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