

Framing Fatherhood: Legal Norms and Media Narratives in Croatia

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Abstract

Gender roles in Croatia reflect the historical and political legacies typical of post-socialist Europe. While women's emancipation advanced during the Yugoslav era, the post-Yugoslav period witnessed a retraditionalisation of family ideals, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Despite growing paternal involvement in childcare, caregiving remains unequally distributed between mothers and fathers. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining a systematic review of Croatian parental-rights legislation with qualitative content and critical discourse analyses of 72 *Index.hr* articles (2022–2025) to examine both the legal framing of fathers' rights—particularly EU-aligned paternity leave—and media representations of fatherhood as areas where state policy and societal norms converge. The findings illuminate how fatherhood is conceptualised in a post-socialist context and reveal factors that shape paternal engagement. As the media analysis is limited to *Index.hr*, Croatia's most widely read news portal, results cannot be taken as being representative of the broader media landscape; future research should include other outlets, social media, and fatherhood-focused platforms in order to provide a fuller picture of paternal representations.

Keywords

child rearing; Croatia; family policy; fatherhood; media representation; social policy

1. Introduction

The image of fatherhood has changed significantly over the past few decades, and there is growing recognition that a father's role is just as important as a mother's in the growth and development of a child (Sokolić, 2021). “New fatherhood” refers to a contemporary model of paternal involvement characterised by emotional presence, active participation, and a shared sense of responsibility in child-rearing

(Miljević-Ridički, 2022). Unlike traditional models, which cast caregiving primarily as the mother's responsibility, "new fatherhood" emphasises the desire of fathers to be engaged, nurturing, and consistently involved in their children's daily lives. Viewed in the light of Connell's theory of gender order, it signals a shift from the hegemonic breadwinner model towards "caring masculinities" that foreground everyday care and emotional attunement (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Elliott, 2016). In late modernity, the normalisation of reciprocity within intimate partnerships—captured by Giddens's (1992) "pure relationship"—supports more egalitarian parenting. This, in turn, is structured by welfare regimes: social-democratic designs with individual, adequately paid "father's quotas" foster engagement more than liberal or conservative-corporatist regimes; comparative evidence links father-specific leave to higher paternal involvement and fairer sharing of care (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Fox et al., 2009; Huerta et al., 2013; Lewis, 1992; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Orloff, 1993).

Gender roles in Croatia today continue to reflect the enduring legacy of the socialist era. According to Končevski (2019), although women in socialist Yugoslavia were legally granted equality and access to various rights and protections, traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms continued to shape their everyday experiences. Legal and institutional advances enabled partial emancipation, but genuine social change occurred slowly and unevenly, especially for women in everyday life. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the founding of the Republic of Croatia in the 1990s, a new sociopolitical context emerged, marked by retraditionalisation. During this period, the ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica), played a significant role in reinforcing traditional norms, promoting nationalist and religious values, advancing a gender-conservative ideology, and fostering a strong alliance with the Catholic Church (Vuletić, 2004; see also Đurin, 2012, as cited in Vučković Juroš, 2015).

Several recent studies (Čulić, 2019; Derado et al., 2020; Klasnić, 2017; Sokolić, 2021; Tomić, 2023) show that although fathers in Croatia have become increasingly involved in childcare over the last couple of decades, traditional beliefs about the "natural roles" of men and women persist, sustaining gender inequality. For instance, Klasnić (2017) found, on the basis of a subsample of 503 employed mothers living with a partner drawn from a nationally representative sample of 600 women, that in 58.5% of households, women were primarily responsible for childcare, while only 0.2% of men took on the primary caregiving role. Furthermore, 85% of women reported exclusively using maternity and parental leave.

While some progress towards gender equality has been achieved, especially in shared childcare, these changes remain limited. A qualitative study by Čulić (2019), involving six fathers on parental leave, revealed that even when fathers actively participate in childcare and view their role as equal, they still perceive motherhood as instinctive and central, often seeing themselves as "helpers" rather than primary caregivers. Tomić (2023) found clear generational differences in fatherhood patterns: Older fathers generally reflected the traditional breadwinner model, while younger fathers displayed features of "new fatherhood," characterised by emotional involvement and egalitarian values. Education appeared to play a role, but one that was less decisive. Many participants reported a more egalitarian approach to gender roles in comparison with their fathers (Tomić, 2023).

1.1. The Legal Framework as an Indicator (or Catalyst) of Changes in Parental Roles

International conventions and national family laws reflect changing understandings of maternal and paternal roles. A significant policy development has been the introduction of quota systems, first in Scandinavian countries and later across Europe, through which a portion of parental leave becomes non-transferable from father to mother (O'Brien, 2009, as cited in Varga, 2021). Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work–life balance for parents and carers represents the European Union's strategy to institutionalise this quota system within national legislation by introducing individual, non-transferable parental-leave rights for both parents. This approach seeks to promote gender equality in caregiving by reserving part of the leave exclusively for fathers.

As an EU member state, Croatia has incorporated the principles of the Directive into its legislative framework by granting individual entitlements to mothers and fathers, thereby aligning with the EU's broader commitment to work–life balance and gender equality. However, despite the introduction in 2013 of a quota system aimed at encouraging paternal involvement, mothers still make use of all or most of the available leave (Varga, 2021). This persistent gender imbalance highlights the need to explore how fatherhood is constructed and represented within both legislative and cultural frameworks.

Cross-national variations in paternal uptake of parental leave suggest that policy design, workplace culture, and individual factors all play a role in shaping men's caregiving behaviour (Varga, 2021). Among the individual factors, socioeconomic status is especially relevant: Fathers with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to take parental leave. This phenomenon is part of the so-called "gender equality paradox"—even highly educated men who support gender equality in theory may struggle to implement egalitarian practices in daily life, particularly in contexts where workplace culture or institutional norms discourage paternal leave (Martín-García et al., 2023). Fathers face few workplace obstacles in countries with a long-standing culture of supporting paternal leave. In contrast, in contexts like Croatia, where this culture is more recent, fathers often need to justify or negotiate their decision to take leave.

1.2. Media as Indicators of Shifts in Parental Roles

From the cultural criticism perspective, the media are not passive reflectors of reality, but active agents in its construction (Hall, 1980, 1997) and especially important agents in the process of identity shaping (Livingstone & Lunt, 2001). Through daily interaction with the media, people are constantly confronted with representations of what it means to be a man, a woman, or a parent. These portrayals have measurable psychological effects, especially when audiences identify with the roles portrayed (Calvert & Wilson, 2009; Martins & Harrison, 2012). This process of internalisation marks the transition to a discursive level of analysis where the symbolic and linguistic mechanisms that construct social roles can be examined in more detail. Media discourse is not a neutral channel for information, but a socially and ideologically charged practice. Critical discourse theorists such as Fairclough (1989, 1995) have shown how media texts reproduce power relations through linguistic and discursive mechanisms. The ideological power of the system of representation lies in its ability to naturalise. When certain representations are repeated in different media environments, they become anchored in the public consciousness as "common sense." This process renders their constructed character invisible, and such representations not only shape individual self-perceptions but also influence institutional norms, cultural expectations, and public policy discourse. Understanding how

fatherhood is represented on widely used digital platforms such as *Index.hr* in Croatia is therefore important in order to decipher the cultural logic underlying current configurations of fatherhood in Croatia.

One previous study (see Gašljević, 2020) analysed representations of fathers on three major Croatian parenting portals (*missMAMA*, *Roda.hr*, and *Roditelji.hr*) using a sample of 104 articles published between 2017 and 2020. Its findings indicate a predominance of egalitarian portrayals in which fathers are presented as nurturing, competent, and equal caregivers, although traditional stereotypes persist, with fathers frequently depicted as secondary or supportive figures. Crucially, the sample consists of media texts (not parents') drawn from Croatian-language parenting portals whose content is largely oriented toward mothers and pregnant women, so the results contextualise discursive representations rather than lived practices (Gašljević, 2020).

Croatia lacks research indicating gender-segregated use of the above-mentioned portals. Swedish evidence (Glatz et al., 2023), while not a direct comparator for Croatia, provides an illustrative reference. Although the sample studied substantially more mothers than fathers, results demonstrated that mothers more often use social media, share child-related content, read parenting blogs, and search online for parenting information. These differences are commonly attributed to mothers' greater online activity and to societal pressures to be a "good" mother (Glatz et al., 2023), whereas comparable pressures on fathers are not evidenced, even within rhetoric about "new fatherhood." On the basis of data regarding a fairer gender ratio in domestic activities in Croatia (Klasnić & Kunac, 2024; B.a.B.e. & UNIZD, 2022; DZS, 2024)—especially in the areas of occasional household tasks and child-related activities—men's interest in "new fatherhood" is also a plausible assumption; however, according to Gašljević (2020), it would seem that equal parenting is more present in mother/hood-related online content than it is in online media portals generally (or specific man-centred online portals such as *aboutmen.hr*, *mancave.hr*, or even at the content-specific portal for single male parents *samohrani.hr*). This aspect deserves further interpretation, but it by far exceeds the scope of this research.

The Croatian media landscape in 2024 was characterised by a high level of digital connectivity and the growing dominance of online news sources. According to the Reuters Institute (2024), 93% of Croatian citizens have internet access and 79% consume news online via websites and apps at least once a week. This figure exceeds the proportion of those who get news via social media (54%) or television (52%), while print media (18%) and radio (25%) play a much smaller role. These statistics show that online news portals have become the most important source of information in Croatia and consequently play a key role in shaping public discourse, including the portrayal of gender and parental roles. Within this digital environment, some media dominate in terms of reach and influence on public perception, and in this context, *Index.hr* stands out as the most-used news portal, with a weekly online reach of approximately 50%. Accordingly, the following analysis examines portrayals of fatherhood in *Index.hr* content and considers how these representations may reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles. In the context of growing awareness of the significance of equal parenting, it is crucial to understand what kind of messages about fatherhood dominate Croatia's most influential channel of mass communication.

A dual analysis of fatherhood—through legal and media perspectives—yields a more comprehensive understanding of how paternal roles are institutionally defined and culturally constructed in contemporary Croatian society. Legislation establishes the formal parameters of fatherhood, while media representations

shape normative expectations surrounding paternal identity. These frameworks are mutually constitutive: legal efforts to promote “new fatherhood” remain limited without corresponding cultural shifts, while media portrayals run the risk of functioning as mere symbolic gestures in the absence of supportive legal structures. Legal codification and symbolic mediation operate as interrelated processes through which fatherhood is both normatively framed and socially enacted.

Taken together, these two domains—legislation and media—provide complementary insights into the social construction of fatherhood in contemporary Croatia. The article, therefore, examines how fatherhood is constructed and represented across these institutional and symbolic frameworks.

2. Methodology

Methodologically, the study employs both qualitative content analysis (QCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to examine how fatherhood is constructed and represented in Croatian public discourse—focusing on two key domains: state family policy and media portrayals—with the aim of uncovering the underlying values, normative expectations and cultural narratives that shape fatherhood and influence the development of more equitable childcare practices in Croatia.

2.1. Legal Analysis

As part of the analysis of state policy, systematic reviews of relevant legal documents and regulations of the Republic of Croatia in force as of April 2025 were undertaken, starting from two research questions:

1. How are parental figures, particularly fathers, mentioned and represented in Croatian legal acts?
2. What legal rights and responsibilities are assigned to fathers in the context of childcare?

The search was conducted using *Zakon.hr*, an online legal database that compiles Croatian laws and subordinate legislation. This platform was selected due to its comprehensive and up-to-date access to the full body of Croatian legal texts. The analysis was deliberately limited to binding legal and subordinate acts. Broader strategic and policy documents, such as national strategies, action plans, or ministerial guidelines, were not included; they do not carry the same legal weight as formal legislation and are therefore outside the scope of this law-focused inquiry.

To investigate how paternity and fatherhood are conceptually and normatively framed within Croatian legislation, keyword-based searches were employed. The search terms included both general and specific references to parental roles: “roditelj*” (parent), “rodilj*” (maternity), “otac*” (father), and “očinsk*” (paternal).

These terms were chosen to capture a wide spectrum of legal language related to parenting, allowing the analysis to identify not only explicit references to fathers but also broader contextualisations of gendered parenting roles within legal discourse.

The qualitative analysis of the retrieved legal texts focused on how fathers are positioned in relation to maternity leave, parental responsibilities, and state-supported childcare policies. Attention was paid to both

the presence and absence of references to fatherhood, as well as the language used when fathers were mentioned, to reveal implicit cultural assumptions embedded in law.

2.2. Analysis of Media Portrayals

This study uses a two-stage qualitative design combining QCA and CDA. The analysis addresses two primary research questions:

1. Do media portrayals of fatherhood support the efforts of legislation to model the “new fatherhood”?
2. Are media portrayals of paternity leave consistent with the cultural logic of the “new fatherhood”?

The period analysed stretches from August 2022 to May 2025 and is anchored in a legislative development: the amendment to the Maternity and Parental Benefits Act (2025), which introduced non-transferable paternity leave. This timescale encompasses the discursive climate surrounding this policy change, enabling an assessment of how it was reflected in the representation of fatherhood in the media.

The media texts were collected with *Index.hr*’s internal search engine using two sets of search terms: the general term “očinstvo” (fatherhood) and the policy-specific term “očinski dopust” (paternity leave). The results were manually checked for relevance. Items were excluded if they were horoscopes, enumerations/listicles, very short factual briefs (<100 words), algorithmically generated/scrapper pages, or if fatherhood was only mentioned in passing (operationalised as <10% of the text or merely nominal mentions without substantive description, claim, or argument). Ambiguous cases were treated conservatively and excluded. The final corpus comprises 72 articles (59 in the “očinstvo” group and 13 in the “očinski dopust” group). It includes authored journalistic articles, unsigned articles published under the label “Index.hr,” content republished by the Croatian News Agency, and (probable) translations or adaptations of lifestyle and entertainment material from international media sources. All texts contribute to the editorial discourse of the portal and shape the public representation of fatherhood. A complete list of the analysed articles (Supplementary File 2) and the coding framework used in the QCA (Supplementary File 1) are provided and form an integral part of this article. All quoted material has been translated by the authors and can be traced back via this coding.

The analytical framework is built around two sets of themes: symbolic representations of fatherhood and representations of paternity leave. The former explores fatherhood in cultural, emotional, and identity contexts; the latter examines how paternity leave is embedded in media discourse. During the QCA, the articles were analysed exclusively within the group from which they were extracted, to ensure internal coherence while allowing for further CDA interpretation through an overarching lens of “new fatherhood” characterised by high ideological ambivalence (see Varga, 2021).

The study follows a hybrid approach that aligns with the MMQTDA model proposed by Alejandro and Zhao (2023), combining corpus-level organisation with discursive depth.

In the first analytic phase, QCA was used to create cluster-specific coding categories for each thematic complex. For the topic “symbolic representations of fatherhood,” two clusters were formed: “cultural representation of

fatherhood” and “stylistic and discursive means of representation.” For the topic “representation of paternity leave,” one cluster was formed comprising legal, administrative, and identity-related features.

Once dominant thematic patterns had been identified, these were then analysed according to Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework, which distinguishes between the textual level, the level of discursive practice, and the level of social practice. In this way, QCA served to capture content in a structured way, while CDA enabled a deeper interpretation of the discursive mechanisms through which the paternal figure is constructed, regulated, and positioned. Lastly, this study builds on previous research that is rare in the Croatian context, particularly the work of Pahić and Miljević-Ridički (2014), who noted the marginalisation of fathers in parenting discourse in printed media. Pahić and Miljević-Ridički (2014) found that Croatian print outlets mentioned mothers more often than fathers, and although portrayals of fathers as co-parents had increased over time, the press still reflected a transitional and at times ambivalent framing of fatherhood. Building on their work, the study turns to national online news, examining the framing of paternity leave and fatherhood so as to test whether print-era patterns have persisted or are being reconfigured online. Online portals—unlike print—introduce editorial/algorithmic logics (SEO-driven headlines, tagging/taxonomy, rapid updates, syndication) that can intensify the circulation of particular frames; examining these affordances allows us to assess how contemporary online products may amplify, diversify, or stabilise public representations of fatherhood. By shifting attention to digital media after the above-mentioned legal reform, the media analysis assesses whether the newly introduced care rights for fathers have been accompanied by a discursive reorientation of their public image.

3. Results

3.1. *Father(hood) in Croatian Legal Acts*

The term “parent” and its derivatives appear in a total of 50 legal acts and 50 by-laws. The by-laws, originating from various legal domains, are mostly linked to primary legislation or serve to expand the rights specified therein. The use of the term “parent” in most regulations is typically accompanied by the note: “Terms used for persons in the masculine gender are neutral and refer to both male and female persons.” This phrasing reflects a formal recognition of diverse family structures. At least at a principled level, this declaration of gender neutrality enables an inclusive interpretation that may encompass various parental roles beyond the traditional mother–father model, such as single-parent families, same-sex parents, or non-biological caregivers. While this interpretative flexibility is essential for the legal and social recognition of many family forms, it will not be further examined here, as this analysis focuses on the meaning and position of fatherhood specifically in relation to motherhood.

The term “maternity” was observed in 36 legal acts. The compound phrase “maternity and parental leave” appears in laws that regulate family, social, labour, pension, or health insurance rights of parents or children. The Family Act (2023) serves as the fundamental legal framework governing family relations in Croatia, and is therefore of particular relevance to this legal review. It defines motherhood through provisions on the establishment and contesting of maternity, and fatherhood through similar provisions on the establishment and contesting of paternity. In both legal proceedings, the roles of the mother and father are indirect yet significant, regardless of whether the legal issue pertains to maternity or paternity. Furthermore, the Family Act includes specific provisions on medically assisted reproduction, which directly influence how

parenthood—especially maternity—is legally determined in such contexts. In addressing other family-related matters, the Act predominantly uses the gender-neutral term “parent(s),” which applies equally to both mothers and fathers in areas such as custody, parental care, child maintenance, and child rights.

The terms “father” and “paternal” appear far less frequently in Croatian legislation than “mother” or “maternity.” When used, they primarily refer to the establishment or contesting of paternity, or to rights related to paternity leave. The term “paternal” occurs almost exclusively in the expression “paternal leave.” This limited use indicates that, while the legislation is increasingly adopting gender-neutral terminology (e.g., “parent”), explicit references to fatherhood remain rare and largely confined to its legal and short-term caregiving dimensions.

The key piece for analysing the normative understanding of fatherhood in Croatian legislation is the Maternity and Parental Support Act (2022–2025). This Act incorporates legislative changes aligned with several significant EU directives, including:

- Directive 92/85/EEC, aimed at improving the health and safety of pregnant workers and those who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding;
- Directive 2010/41/EU, promoting equal treatment for self-employed men and women;
- Directive 2019/1158/EU, concerning work–life balance for parents and carers.

Article 1 of the Maternity and Parental Benefits Act (2025) states that:

For the purpose of protecting motherhood, caring for and raising a newborn child, ensuring the equal sharing of rights and responsibilities between both parents, and promoting the balance between family and professional life, the law establishes the right of parents and equivalent persons to time-related and financial support, as well as the conditions, methods of exercising and financing these rights, and the competent authorities responsible for implementing the Act.

The wording of the legislation suggests an intention to ensure the equal sharing of rights and responsibilities between both parents, thereby reinforcing a normative vision of fatherhood that aligns with the principles of “new fatherhood.”

According to Article 3 of the Maternity and Parental Support Act, both parents (mother and father), as well as other individuals granted parental responsibility by a competent authority—such as adoptive parents, legal guardians, foster parents, or any person entrusted with the daily care of a minor—are entitled to (a) time-related benefits (e.g., various types of leave, work exemptions, dedicated time for childcare) and (b) financial support (e.g., wage compensation, allowances, direct aid, and one-off payments for newborn children).

Article 7 defines paternity leave as the right of employed or self-employed fathers or equivalent caregivers to take time off work following the birth of a child, in order to provide care and support. According to Article 16, fathers are entitled to uninterrupted paternity leave in the following durations:

- 10 working days for the birth of one child;
- 15 working days for twins, triplets, or multiple births.

This leave must be used within the first six months of the child's life and is non-transferable, meaning it cannot be reassigned to the other parent. It is also available regardless of the mother's employment status, thereby emphasising the individual entitlement and autonomous caregiving role of the father.

In addition to paternity leave, the Act grants each parent an individual entitlement to four months of parental leave, of which two months are non-transferable. During this leave, parents receive compensation amounting to 100% of their average earnings, up to a statutory maximum, paid by the Croatian Health Insurance Fund. These provisions formally affirm gender-equal parenting by guaranteeing both parents independent access to leave and financial benefits.

These findings suggest that, while Croatian legislation formally affirms the principle of gender equality in parenting, the specific articulation and practical framing of fatherhood remain limited—often positioning fathers as secondary or conditional. This conclusion is supported by two observations. Firstly, Croatian legislation places greater normative emphasis on motherhood: while the term “maternity” appears in 36 legal acts, explicit references to fatherhood are far less common, and even the Maternity and Parental Support Act explicitly frames its purpose as the “protection of motherhood” before mentioning equal parental rights. Secondly, the scope of fathers' entitlements remains limited. Article 16 grants paternity leave of only 10 (or exceptionally 15) working days, strictly confined to the first six months of the child's life. In contrast, mothers are entitled to several months of maternity leave that may be converted into longer parental leave. This asymmetry indicates that, despite the formal recognition of gender equality, the legislative framework still centres primarily on motherhood and positions fatherhood as a supplementary caregiving role.

Taken together, these findings directly address the research questions by showing how parental figures, particularly fathers, are represented in Croatian legal acts and what rights and responsibilities are assigned to them in the context of childcare. Fathers are mentioned infrequently—and predominantly in supportive or secondary contexts—while mothers remain central to the legal definition of parenthood. Although fathers now hold individual, non-transferable leave entitlements, their legal rights and responsibilities in childcare remain narrower and less apparent than those of mothers.

3.2. Father(hood) in Croatian Media: Symbolic Representations

The analysed media corpus constructs fatherhood as a topos characterised by contradictions. Fatherhood is rarely portrayed as an everyday, competent, and gender-equitable practice. Rather, it appears as stylised—a media product built on affective packaging, celebrity intimacy and identity branding; as moralised—anchored in protector scripts, gendered asymmetries and coded virtues that ascribe value or blame; or as pathologised—framed through deviance, transgression and the policing of failed masculinity, with “redemptive” arcs occasionally converting stigma into emotional capital.

3.2.1. Fatherhood Between Exception and Deviation

Although they do not dominate the corpus numerically, representations of criminal or socially transgressive fatherhood form one of its most emotionally charged clusters. These texts depict fathers as perpetrators of abuse, incest, or neglect, thereby marking the symbolic boundaries of failed masculinity. Examples include headlines such as: “In Zadar, he raped his daughter for 16 years and impregnated her: sentenced to 40 years

in prison" (A26); or: "Judges reduce sentences for paedophiles because they are fathers and war veterans" (A32). Such headline portrayals reinforce the association between fatherhood and moral or legal sanction, constructing it as a stigmatised identity defined by human failure. Even when fatherhood is not overtly criminalised, it is linked to social dysfunction, as in: "He fathered a child with a 13-year-old and did not go to prison, but became an NBA legend" (A44). In the latter, paternal identity is embedded in a narrative of unresolved moral tension that is ultimately neutralised through a redemption arc.

3.2.2. Famous Fatherhood as an Emotional Platform

A dominant group revolves around celebrity male figures whose fatherhood is represented through stylised affective representations. "Emotional platform" is used here as a proposed syntagm rather than an established term, designating a media arrangement that repeatedly stages sympathy, intimacy, or redemption around an individual. Such patterned staging attaches positive affect to the role, thereby accumulating as emotional capital: affective credibility and goodwill. That capital can be mobilised to popularise narratives of "new fatherhood," often via celebrity cues and formats (e.g., "sobriety-as-care" arcs, scenes of tender caregiving). These representations blend celebrity culture with intimate fatherhood, creating emotionally resonant images that simultaneously humanise and aestheticise the paternal role. Examples show fatherhood as a sphere of deep emotional vulnerability, like: "Brad Pitt (60) wants more children: Source says he is madly in love with Ines (31)" (A20); or: "Colin Farrell is looking for a home for his sick son: 'What if we're gone tomorrow?'" (A8). Farrell elaborates:

It's tricky. Some parents will say they want to take care of their child themselves, and I respect that. But I'm afraid and I ask myself—what if I have a heart attack tomorrow and, God forbid, James's mother, Kim, has a car accident and something happens to her, and James is then left alone?...Then he would end up in state care, and where would he go? We would have no say in that.

This framing underscores the anxiety of future-oriented paternal care and the fear of his son's institutionalisation, thus deepening the emotional register of the narrative.

Also, headlines like: "John Stamos shares a touching piece of advice Bob Saget gave him about fatherhood" (A50) and "Matthew Perry was desperate to become a father: 'I am no longer afraid of love'" (A33) portray fatherhood as a redemptive or transformative experience. This is again aptly illustrated by Farrell's quote, who links his sobriety to his capacity to parent:

I wasn't able to be a friend, let alone a father, to a child with such demanding needs. If it weren't for my sobriety, I wouldn't be here for James, enjoying the miracles of his life and supporting him in the way I feel I can. (A8)

Such narratives position fatherhood as a catalyst for personal transformation and moral repair.

These narratives are summarised under the terms "caring father," "celebrity fatherhood," or "fatherhood as identity" and offer a partial departure from traditional scripts. However, these portrayals are limited to the realm of celebrity, aestheticising emotional labour without structurally questioning the gendered organisation of care in everyday life.

3.2.3. Reproduction of Patriarchal Models

Despite gestures towards more egalitarian visions of fatherhood, many articles reproduce archetypal male roles, particularly that of the father as protector in politically charged contexts. The discourse of militarised masculinity is exemplified in A7 (“DP-Minister of Demography: Who Will Carry a Gun on Their Shoulder If There Are No Children?”), where the minister declares:

We must protect the Dalmatinska zagora and the South, just as we must have soldiers and brave warriors. But who will carry a weapon on their shoulder if there are no children? Who will guard our homeland if we do not invest in our families?

This statement explicitly ties demographic reproduction to military readiness, framing fatherhood as a collective obligation rather than a private choice. Similarly, the figure of the “authoritarian father” recurs in “Paedophiles Get Lighter Sentences Because They Are War Veterans” (A32) and “Dalija Orešković: DP Member Wants to Protect Life From Conception To Be Able to Send Someone to War” (A6).

These texts are consistent with codes in which the paternal role is embedded in institutional systems of power. At the same time, fatherhood—especially when marked by characteristics such as veteran status or traditional masculinity—is often used as a symbolic shield to mitigate the criminal justice consequences for typically male offences such as sexual violence or child abuse. This discursive orientation uses paternal authority, entitlement, or obligation as a legitimising narrative that supplants accountability. The ideological association of fatherhood with the role of national defender reproduces some of the oldest archetypes of traditional fatherhood: authoritarianism, emotional distance, and control.

3.2.4. Media Fatherhood as a Stylised, Affective Product

In numerous articles, fatherhood is presented as a media product: stylised, image-driven, and affectively charged. This is particularly evident in lifestyle or entertainment articles in which fatherhood is an image of an emotional or moral identity. In A27 (“He Lay Down on the Street After a Tantrum—His Father’s Reaction Is a Hit”) or A30 (“Chris Hemsworth Explains Why He Prefers His Son to Call Him by His Name Rather Than ‘Dad’”), the paternal role is portrayed in a cheerful way, often reduced to endearing moments. Even in texts in which fathers express the intention to change their lifestyle for the sake of their children, as in the headline: “Popular singer plans to give up music to focus on being a father” (A55), such expressions remain within the symbolic order of personal branding coded under “celebrity fatherhood” and “fatherhood as identity.” The paternal figure is affectively present, but functionally abstracted and mediated through cultural tropes rather than concrete engagement in caring.

3.2.5. Asymmetry Between the Sexes and Coded Moral Concepts

Fathers are judged more harshly for deviant behaviour, but rewarded more generously for minimal involvement. In contrast, mothers’ roles are largely invisible unless failure or absence is cited. This asymmetry is evident in articles such as “Can Nick Cannon Be a Successful Father? Here’s What Experts Say” (A47). In the latter, productive fatherhood is simultaneously questioned and apologised for. In the piece “Is Late Fatherhood Selfish? Fatherhood After 55 Significantly Increases the Risk of Autism” (A41), the paternal figure becomes the object of moral fears and biomedical suspicions.

3.2.6. Emotional Capital of Caring Fatherhood

While dominant media images of fatherhood oscillate between deviance, spectacle, and symbolic authority, a smaller cluster constructs fatherhood through emotional availability, domestic care, and psychological transformation. These texts align with codes such as caring/engaged father, reformist fatherhood, and fatherhood as identity, articulating caring masculinity (beyond “new fatherhood”) as a potential normative horizon.

Fatherhood is frequently framed as a redemptive or transformative experience that reorders male identity and life priorities. In A33, fatherhood appears as both a desired emotional goal and a narrative of personal repair; a similar script shapes A55, where involvement is equated with authenticity and the reprioritisation of values.

At the same time, this affective framing is often embedded in celebrity discourse, which personalises caregiving while detaching it from structural constraints. The result is an aestheticisation of care that confers visibility yet limits generalisability, since the conditions enabling such practices are seldom interrogated.

A notable segment explicitly engages previously marginalised paternal experiences, signalling a shift toward “new fatherhood.” In the article “Dad Took a Walk With Baby While Suffering From Postnatal Depression—It Sparked Something Big” (A1), paternal vulnerability and affective struggle are legitimised as dimensions of masculinity/fatherhood; the piece “Fatherhood Hinders Career Advancement for One in Five Working Fathers in Zagreb” (A21) briefly surfaces institutional and structural constraints linked to career progression and leave policies.

Another strand foregrounds everyday practices and dialogic intimacy, using micro-interactions to contest authoritarian models. In A30, closeness and negotiated address index a relationship built on conversation rather than hierarchy; “These Famous Men Are Single Fathers...” (A40) frames single fatherhood as sacrifice and moral investment, even as it tends toward exceptionalism rather than normalisation.

Across this cluster, the evaluative tone is positive and laudatory, converting emotional availability into a form of symbolic capital. Fathers are praised as “committed,” “emotionally mature,” and “inspiring,” while moralising treatments of failed or superficial celebrity fatherhood (e.g., coverage of Elon Musk [A3, A9, A10, A11, A12]) mark the boundaries of acceptable paternal affect.

Despite its progressive register, this representation individualises fatherhood and rarely addresses the institutional or gendered organisation of care. Nevertheless, the increased visibility of emotionally engaged fathers indicates a discursive opening towards more diverse forms of fatherhood and masculinity.

3.3. Representations of Paternity Leave

Paternity leave functions discursively not only as a policy tool, but also as a symbolic arena in which social values, gender expectations, and care arrangements are negotiated and re-articulated. Most articles present paternity leave in a technocratic way, as a legal entitlement governed by formal policies and bureaucratic regulations. A smaller group of texts includes personal fatherhood experiences (Supplementary File 2, Items 1 and 8). Even if such positive portrayals are marginalised, they point to the emergence of new

paternal subjectivities. However, these progressive representations sit alongside structural barriers and residual gender norms that limit the full cultural legitimacy of egalitarian parenthood.

3.3.1. Political Framing

The prevailing framework positions paternity leave as a legal entitlement embedded in a broader policy affecting/governing population and family. Most articles are technocratic and administrative in style and linguistic choices (Items 2, 6, 7). The gender-equality dimension is not always explicitly considered, but exceptions to this trend are Items 3, 5 and 11, in which the policy is presented as a catalyst for cultural change, suggesting alternative narratives in which caring fatherhood is presented as socially valuable and emotionally enriching. In Item 3, for example, Željka Josić, State Secretary at the Central State Office for Demography and Youth, emphasises the social significance of paternity leave:

We are extremely pleased that this measure has been well received among fathers and that more and more of them are getting involved in early childcare....Social expectations regarding parental roles are gradually changing.

She further notes: “Traditionally, parental roles meant that women took care of children while men were expected to provide for the family, and fathers’ involvement in everyday childcare was not considered necessary” (Item 3). These statements frame paternity leave as part of a cultural shift toward more equal parental responsibilities.

3.3.2. Discursive Normalisation

The discursive tone in the corpus ranges from neutral and informative (Item 6) to affirmative and proactive (Items 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). For instance, Item 7 features a norm-setting message from the Central State Office for Demography and Youth: “Don’t wait for the perfect moment to feel ready to share childcare responsibilities with your partner—take the plunge and embrace the experience.” Articles with a purely administrative tone tend to depersonalise the topic, while those containing first-person statements or emotive language (Items 1, 3, 6, 8, 13) help to normalise and legitimise paternal care, as evident in Item 1:

I was informed that I could use my paternity leave until the child turned six months old. Since my son turns six months on 11 August, I immediately started the process so that my leave would begin at the start of the month.

Several articles (Items 3, 9, and 11) contribute to the discursive construction of “new fatherhood” as a culturally legitimate and socially desirable practice. This construction is often linked to broader narratives of social modernisation and gender equality. At the same time, some articles (Item 10) emphasise the fragility of this emerging norm by pointing to the persistent structural barriers (particularly financial disincentives, workplace cultures) that hinder the full implementation of egalitarian parenting practices. For instance, Item 9 highlights that “the main barrier fathers point out is the potential financial loss associated with taking paternity leave,” and notes that fathers who do take parental leave “are often seen as facing problems with their employers—more frequently than mothers.”

3.3.3. Visibility and Agency

The degree of fathers' visibility varies greatly. In most articles, they are represented as aggregated data or administrative labels. In contrast, in some articles, fathers are portrayed as active agents who research their rights:

When the time came to look into the situation in more detail, as the deadline was approaching, I went to the local HZZO [Croatian Health Insurance Fund] office in Orahovica to ask what I needed to do. (Item 1)

They negotiate with employers:

First, I had to obtain a certificate from my employer confirming my personal income for the first six months of the year and, just in case, a statement of consent showing that my employer agreed with me taking paternity leave. (Item 1)

And they engage emotionally in caregiving and reflect publicly on their experiences:

This paternity leave has been an eye-opener for me. (Item 11; see also Item 8)

These narratives foreground paternal subjectivity and position fatherhood as a legitimate and desired social identity. In such texts, the father is presented as a competent carer.

While Sections 3.2 and 3.3 rely on QCA to code and categorise the media corpus, Section 3.4 applies CDA to interpret these categories through the lens of power relations, ideology, and cultural norms. This transition marks the shift from descriptive thematic analysis to a critical synthesis that situates the findings within broader socio-political and cultural contexts.

3.4. *Contours of the Fatherhood Field: A Critical-Discourse Synthesis*

The key findings of the thematic clusters are reconceptualised using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, integrating textual analysis (lexical choices, genre conventions), discursive practice (production and circulation of media narratives), and social practice (ideological and institutional effects). At the centre of this synthesis is a structural contradiction: the discursive anchoring of traditional paternal archetypes coexists with the emerging but precarious articulation of a "new fatherhood." Thus, an affectively engaged and socially legitimised paternal identity remains ideologically unstable.

3.4.1. The Resilience of Traditional Paternity Scripts

In various textual genres—especially in crime reporting, the tabloid-like texts and judicial commentaries—the paternal figure is reproduced through negative symbolic codes: the absent, abusive father. These negative symbolic codes based on the stereotype of the absent, abusive *father* function as intertextual discursive patterns that reinforce long-standing masculine scripts. At the level of textual analysis, these representations are reinforced by lexical choices associated with violence, moral failure, or emotional incapacity, establishing fatherhood as a locus of risk or deviance. From the perspective of discursive practice, these portrayals

circulate through highly routinised and ideologically inflected genres (news reports, quotations, and commentaries from police or court reports). Fathers are portrayed as threats or failures; mothers, if present, are portrayed as protectors or victims. This asymmetry is systematically reproduced and naturalised. At the level of social practice, these recurring narratives contribute to what Fairclough (1995) refers to as ideological naturalisation. The repeated circulation of symbolic associations between masculinity, criminality, and paternal dysfunction makes these associations commonplace and culturally stable, even when challenged by individual counter-narratives. In this way, distant, authoritative fatherhood is not only represented, but normatively recognised.

3.4.2. The Ambivalence of Celebrity Fatherhood

Representations of celebrity fathers form a particular discursive node characterised by affective engagement, emotional accessibility, and lifestyle framing. In these texts, fathers are portrayed as emotionally available, loving, and actively involved in caring. At the textual level, this is achieved through affect-laden vocabulary, anecdotal details, and visual semiotics (e.g., photos of physical closeness, quotes about children, references to emotional transformation). Discursively, such representations operate within entertainment news in which the emotional and the performative merge into an aesthetic of intimate masculinity. However, these narratives rarely extend to structural aspects such as labour policies, gender equality, or systemic support for caregiving. Instead, paternal care is presented as an individual lifestyle choice. At the level of social practice, this represents a neoliberal discursive formation in which paternal emotional engagement is reconciled with authenticity, affective labour, and self-realisation, while remaining structurally apolitical. Prominent fatherhood thus legitimises the “new fatherhood,” albeit in a depoliticised and privatised framework that is detached from collective or institutional criticism.

3.4.3. Institutional Appeals to the “New Fatherhood”

Articles dealing with paternity leave and family policy use a different semiotic grammar. They operate primarily within technocratic or policy-oriented genres (official announcements, statistical reports, or public information formatted as portal text) that discursively construct fatherhood as a legal right rather than a relational identity. Textually, these articles use modalised and normative formulations that articulate fatherhood as a policy goal or entitlement. These statements are often depersonalised by referring to “fathers” in statistical or legal terms and thus run the risk of making the paternal subject invisible. However, some of the texts contain first-person statements or accounts of experiences, introducing affect and agency into an otherwise procedural discourse. This discursive shift towards a narrative and testimonial form extends the semantic reach of “paternity leave” and connects policy to lived experience. However, these framings often remain performative. The symbolic promotion of egalitarian fatherhood is rarely accompanied by a sustained discussion of structural barriers—such as employer resistance, normative gender roles, or pay gaps—that repeatedly limit actual paternal participation. The ideological function of these texts is therefore to legitimise the idea of “new fatherhood” without fully enabling its material realisation.

3.4.4. Fatherhood Between Spectacle and Governance

In all the discursive areas mentioned, fatherhood oscillates between extremes: as spectacle and as governance. By spectacle is meant the aestheticised staging of fatherhood for visibility and affect—celebrity

intimacy, redemption plots and the sensationalisation of deviance, soliciting attention and emotional investment. By governance is meant the articulation of fatherhood through norms and institutions—policy debate (leave, benefits), demographic and protector scripts, coded morality, and workplace or administrative rules that evaluate and regulate paternal conduct. These are “extremes” in the sense that they pull representation towards either affective display (spectacle) or normative regulation (governance), thereby leaving ordinary, gender-equitable practice comparatively underexposed.

Textually, this split is reflected in a disjunctive use of genres that either dramatise or rationalise: quasi-tabloid and entertainment formats versus bureaucratic and legal styles. The result is a paradox of discursive visibility: fathers are hypervisible when they deviate, suffer, or perform; they are rendered invisible when absorbed into institutional discourse. This asymmetry signals a broader semiotic economy in which fatherhood functions either as a locus of cultural anxiety or as a depoliticised administrative unit. Here, “cultural anxiety” refers to a condensation point for wider uncertainties—demographic decline and nationhood, crisis talk about masculinity and authority, the redistribution of care, and the moral policing of sexuality.

In CDA terms, the category of “father” functions not just as a referent but as a discursive topos, a strategic position in language through which ideological battles over gender, authority and care are fought. The “new fatherhood” is not yet an established norm, but a semiotic endeavour: constructed by certain discourses, restricted by others, and constantly contested at the interface of culture, politics, and media.

4. Discussion

This study offers a multidimensional contribution to the analysis of fatherhood in Croatia by combining discursive and legal perspectives. On a theoretical level, it shifts the analytical lens beyond the binary opposition between maternal and paternal roles, treating fatherhood as an autonomous discursive formation. This perspective allows for an exploration of paternal subjectivation outside the conceptual confines of motherhood, while also engaging with the broader ideological and institutional mechanisms that shape gendered parental identities. From a societal perspective, the study reveals a dual pattern in media constructions of fatherhood. This formulation reflects a CDA-level synthesis of the QCA typology: The six themes identified in Sections 3.2.1 through 3.2.6 cohere into two higher-order orientations—affective visibility (spectacle) and normative regulation (governance)—that organise how fatherhood is made legible across the corpus. Emotional capital operates across both orientations. On one hand, fathers are portrayed through emotionally charged or deviant roles, often within narratives of family crisis or media spectacle. On the other hand, they appear as regulated subjects within the framework of gender-equality policies. As a result, fatherhood is discursively situated between banalisation and administrative normalisation. This duality underscores deeper tensions within the normative frameworks surrounding fatherhood and the social expectations of caring masculinity.

Considered jointly, the legal, institutional, and media perspectives presented in this study point to a complex and layered image of contemporary fatherhood in Croatia. While legal entitlements and policy narratives increasingly support active paternal engagement, the practical uptake of caregiving roles remains constrained by economic, procedural and symbolic factors. The broader normalisation of caregiving fatherhood continues to be shaped (and in many ways limited) by structural inequalities, cultural expectations and persistent gender norms, i.e., all three things frame fathers as secondary caregivers. These

findings call for both expanded policy measures and deeper public discourse aimed at reshaping dominant representations of fatherhood and enabling more inclusive models of care.

Complementing this, the analysis of the legal framework shows that while Croatian legislation formally affirms gender-equal parenting, it continues to frame fatherhood in relatively narrow, often supplementary terms. Taken together, the discursive and legal findings expose both symbolic and structural boundaries that shape how fatherhood is represented, understood, and enacted in contemporary Croatian society. Although Croatian legislation ensures equal parental leave entitlements for both parents, the actual distribution of leave use reveals a persistent gender imbalance, highlighting the disconnect between normative frameworks and everyday caregiving realities. According to the 2023 Annual Report of the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of the Republic of Croatia (Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, 2024), 16,289 fathers used paternity leave in 2023—mostly the standard 10-day entitlement—compared to just 2,022 men who used parental leave. While the former covers a brief period immediately after childbirth, it is the latter that allows for extended caregiving: The report confirms a nearly eight-times-greater uptake of paternity leave, and shows that fathers overwhelmingly use their short individual entitlement; longer leaves are still taken predominantly by mothers. The Ombudsperson attributes this disparity primarily to financial incentives: While paternity leave is fully paid and uncapped, parental leave benefits are limited. Moreover, men remain nearly absent (under 1%) from other leave categories, including those available to the self-employed and unemployed.

In her commentary, the Ombudsperson highlights persistent gender stereotypes, lack of employer and partner support, and fear of workplace repercussions as key barriers that prevent men from using family-related leave. Despite the gradual increase in paternity leave uptake, a substantial gender gap remains. Croatia is still one of the EU countries with the lowest male participation in childcare leave and offers one of the shortest paternity leaves (10–15 working days). The Ombudsperson, therefore, calls for an extension of paternity leave and broader structural measures to support gender-equal caregiving.

A qualitative study by Varga (2021) offers further insight into the gender gap in parental-leave uptake by highlighting both the transformative impact of leave-taking on fathers and the key structural, bureaucratic, and cultural barriers that may discourage broader participation. The study, based on interviews with 11 middle-class fathers in Zagreb, showed that extended leave can significantly contribute to the development of caregiving competencies and a redefinition of gender roles in the private sphere. However, these findings remain socio-demographically narrow, as participants were mostly well-educated, economically stable, and urban. The study did not include fathers from other regions or social groups, and it is likely that attitudes and practices around caregiving differ significantly in rural or economically disadvantaged contexts. This underscores the need for regionally diverse research that can inform more inclusive policy development.

Although most fathers in Varga's study did not report resistance from their employers, many had encountered bureaucratic obstacles, particularly in dealings with the Croatian Health Insurance Fund, which indicates that procedural clarity and institutional support remain essential for wider engagement. While such leave fosters stronger father–child bonds and greater caregiving confidence, these experiences remain limited largely to privileged groups, underscoring the need for broader structural and cultural support (André et al., 2025; Varga, 2021).

Finally, while this study offers insights into the legal and media constructions of fatherhood in Croatia, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the legal analysis was restricted to formal legislation and subordinate acts available through *Zakon.hr*; broader policy documents such as national strategies or action plans were intentionally excluded, due to their limited legal authority. While this choice ensured analytical focus, it may have omitted relevant discursive signals present in non-binding but influential policy texts. Secondly, the media analysis was confined to *Index.hr*, Croatia's most widely read online news portal, which—although relevant and current—does not capture the full diversity of the media landscape, including television, radio, print, or user-generated content on social networks and blogs. Additionally, the study did not incorporate audience reception data, leaving open questions about how these media constructions are interpreted or internalised by the public, particularly by fathers themselves. Thirdly, both components of the study focus primarily on discourse and representation rather than on lived experiences. Future research could address these gaps by integrating empirical data such as interviews with fathers from various regions, socioeconomic backgrounds and family arrangements in order to explore how legal entitlements and media narratives are experienced in everyday life.

5. Conclusion

By combining legal and discursive analysis, this study offers a multifaceted account of how fatherhood in Croatia is at the same time both regulated and symbolically produced, revealing a dual pattern in media constructions—between affect-driven spectacle and governance-oriented regulation—and a persistent gap between formal entitlements and everyday caregiving. Although Croatian legislation is increasingly affirming gender-equal parenting, uptake remains uneven: In 2023, 16,289 fathers used (fully paid) paternity leave, compared with only 2,022 who used parental leave, with men almost absent from other leave categories. This disparity points to the continued influence of financial design, workplace expectations, and cultural norms.

These findings carry direct implications for policy and public communication. Public communication strategies should align more systematically with the state's objective of promoting engaged fatherhood, not only providing information about rights but also challenging stereotypes that cast fathers as absent, deviant, or exceptional. Because media discourse shapes social expectations, gender-sensitive components in media literacy and journalism education can support more balanced coverage—portraying fathers as competent, everyday carers and normalising routine paternal care alongside maternal care. Cross-sectoral coordination is equally important: Institutions, employers, and civil society should work in concert to reduce procedural opacity, strengthen employer support, and address the symbolic penalties that still attach to men's overt participation in care.

More broadly, fatherhood should be framed less as an individual lifestyle choice and more as a collective social practice sustained by legal design, organisational routines, and cultural narratives. Extending paternity leave duration and recalibrating parental-leave compensation would help translate formal equality into practical feasibility; at the same time, sustained public debate can consolidate “caring masculinity” as an ordinary, unmarked expectation rather than an exceptional performance. Taken together, the discursive and legal evidence underscores both the symbolic and structural boundaries that currently shape how fatherhood is represented, understood, and enacted—and indicates a pathway towards more inclusive models of care.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4, 2025), which was used to enhance linguistic clarity and conceptual expression in English. As English is not the authors' first language, the tool was employed for language refinement and structural suggestions. Its use reflects practical constraints faced by researchers without access to professional editing services. This disclosure statement was itself translated and refined with the support of ChatGPT. All AI-assisted content has been critically reviewed and approved by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the final version.

Supplementary Material

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

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