

New Generation of Fathers in Poland: A Path to Gender Equality?

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Abstract

This article explores fatherhood in Poland among dual-earner couples, parents to at least one young child. The birth of a child usually results in a more traditional, gendered division of labour among partners, including that of newly created childcare duties. However, a visible intergenerational shift is developing, with new fathers increasingly expressing the desire to be more involved with their children, as compared to their own fathers. Mothers seem to support this change and prioritise fathers building relationships with their children rather than doing more housework. This article focuses on the results of 74 semi-structured individual interviews with 37 couples, conducted in 2019 in Poland. I explore how the concept of “involved fatherhood” is understood and practiced amid many contradictions. For example, despite generous and seemingly gender-neutral social policies (e.g., long parental leave available for both mothers and fathers), there is a strongly gendered uptake, with women using the vast majority of all leaves. For many of the fathers in my sample, fatherhood was a life-changing experience. However, it is important to mention that even when a father is an active caregiver, this doesn't always translate to a more gender-equal division of labour. Through the experiences of my respondents, I argue that despite increasing cultural support for involved fatherhood, there are still challenges with practicing it.

Keywords

division of labour; equality; gender; involved fatherhood; Poland

1. Introduction

There is wide agreement between scholars from different disciplines and countries (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Forste & Fox, 2012; Kan et al., 2011) that, overall, women do more domestic labour than men. Data from 15 countries show that fathers' involvement in housework and childcare increased from 1971 to 2010, but

the amount of contribution is highly dependent on the welfare regime, with the Nordic countries being leaders in involved fatherhood (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). What is more, research indicates that the transition to parenthood leads the majority of couples to a more inegalitarian arrangement regarding the division of labour in the family in the long-term (Dechant & Blossfeld, 2015; EIGE, 2020; Mikucka, 2009).

In Poland, the situation is similar, with the time use survey data from 2023 showing that women do on average four hours and 19 minutes of domestic labour per day, in comparison to the two hours and 41 minutes done by men (GUS, 2024). The gap decreased in the last decade, with men doing 20 minutes more of domestic labour, but they still spend only half the time that women do on childcare. This is consistent with the most common way of sharing responsibilities, when both men and women are expected to work full-time, but men are expected to earn more, and often do overtime, while women are responsible for the majority of domestic labour and often “stay at home” when children are young. This intra-family division of labour is usually called “dual earner” division (Aidukaite & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, 2020), “dual earner–female double burden” model (Matysiak & Steinmetz, 2008; Siemieńska, 2008), or “junior–senior partnership” (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011).

As a post-socialist country, Poland has a long history of female employment. However, during the Polish People’s Republic, there was no expectation for men to do any caring work; instead, the state offered maternity leave and free nurseries and preschools to enable mothers to work. After the regime’s transformation into a liberal democracy, all of these social services shrank and women were expected to “fill in the gap” (Suwada, 2015). The unemployment rate and economic pressure were significant. Traditional values, supported by the political power of the Polish Catholic Church, clashed with the gender mainstreaming and *acquis communautaire* of the EU. I share the conviction of Risman (2017, p. 210) that individual choices that people make (e.g., choices about division of labour among couples) “are profoundly shaped by the gender structure that exists before they do and into which they are born.” In this article, I will use the concept of gender structure and individual, interactional, and institutional factors shaping people’s decisions to analyse who does childcare, and specifically how the engagement of fathers is imagined, negotiated, and renegotiated by various actors.

This issue is particularly important given that expectations about the quality of childcare increased between generations, and fulfilling them requires a lot of time and resources. For example, historically, artificial milk was considered as healthy as breast milk (Stevens et al., 2009) and, contrary to current practices of attachment parenting, when a baby was crying “without reason” (meaning it was fed and had a fresh diaper), it was normal to just leave it alone. Overall, the best practice used to be focused on securing the child’s financial stability and keeping them clean and regularly fed. Sarnowska and Pustułka (2024) argue that the transformation and “import of Western culture” resulted in diverse, and at times contradictory, mothering models, with “intensive mothering” (Ennis, 2014; Hays, 1996) taking precedence. However, the high expectations regarding childcare are not exclusively placed on women. In recent years, social expectations towards active fathering have increased, as well as fathers’ engagement in their children’s lives (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Kilkey et al., 2013). Overall, expectations for parents have risen significantly in European countries and now include psychological, developmental, and educational investment in children (e.g., Gomez Espino, 2013; Ruckdeschel, 2024; Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2024). As a consequence, “intensive parenting” puts an additional burden on both mothers and fathers.

Lamb (1987) specifies three types of engagement with children; the typology was designed to study “emerging fatherhood,” although it may be applied to any person. The first type of engagement with children is the most direct one, called “interaction,” meaning that you spend time with a child. The less active one, “accessibility,” describes all moments when you are available to a child when needed, but you may do other things at the same time (e.g., cook). The last type of engagement is called “responsibility” and requires knowing the needs of the child and taking care of their well-being. It includes planning and organising connections to childcare (e.g., doctors’ appointments), and ensuring that they have clothes to wear and a safe space at home. I use this framework to discuss fathers’ involvement with childcare and show that fathers, contrary to mothers, usually do not engage in all aspects of childcare. This is consistent with recent research in CEE countries (Dančíková, 2025; Rebrey, 2023; Švab & Humer, 2026; Takács, 2020), which shows that the transition from traditional to more involved fatherhood is gradual and influenced by family policies in particular countries.

Overall, I conceptualise involved fatherhood as a process involving “challenging deeply engrained behaviours and established notions” (Atkinson, 2022). Therefore, using the concept of “gender structure” proposed by Risman (2017) allows me to capture both the rigidity of existing gender roles and the possibility of change. Similarly, Lamb’s (1987) typology allows to differentiate between different types of activities and analyse the gradual transition to more involved fatherhood. Overall, the study is guided by two main questions:

1. What does involved fatherhood mean in the Polish context?
2. Which factors facilitate involved fatherhood and which constitute a barrier to involved fatherhood?

Firstly, I discuss institutional factors shaping parenthood in Poland, including paternity and parental leaves, which may be taken by a father, limited provision of institutional childcare, and cultural context. Secondly, I present the methodology of my study, with a particular focus on the recruitment process and characteristics of my respondents. Thirdly, I present an analysis of my interviews, showing the role of fathers in modern Polish families, discussing factors facilitating and hindering involved fatherhood. Finally, I discuss my findings, using both the concept of gender structure (Risman, 2017) and Lamb’s (1987) typology of engagement with childcare.

2. Institutional Context of Parenthood in Poland

In 2017, 77% of Poles agreed with the statement “the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family” (European Commission, 2017). Only Hungarians and Bulgarians reported higher levels of agreement. Surprisingly, faced with the statement “the most important role of a man is to earn money,” eight other countries in the EU reported a more conservative standpoint compared to Poland. Still, 65% of Poles agree with this view, in comparison to the EU average (from 28 countries) of 43%. Overall, Polish people value family life, and despite a long history of full-time employment among women, the gender division of labour is persistent.

There is also a strong social norm that children aged 0–3 years old are best cared for by family at their own home, preferably by their mother, which is named a “norm of threeness” (Saxonberg, 2014). The clear division between children younger than three years old and 3–6 years old is based on the history of institutional childcare, with nurseries for children aged 0–3 years old and preschools for children aged 3–6 years old. Historically, nurseries used to have rather low standards in terms of care quality, focused as

they were on the physical safety of the children and the standardisation of procedures; they were also often overcrowded (Szelewa, 2019). Preschools, on the other hand, offered official educational programmes. Nowadays, the quality of care is similar for nurseries and preschools, yet 75% of Polish women and 78% of Polish men agree that mothers of children younger than three years of age should not work (Ciaputa et al., 2016). This shows how important the “norm of threeness” is in contemporary Poland, and creates additional pressure on mothers, as they may feel guilty when they decide to go back to work after parental leave.

A significant childcare gap exists in Poland, as the state offers one year of paid leave (maternity and parental leaves combined) and guarantees a place in preschool for three-year-olds and older children, which is consistent with the “norm of threeness.” According to Eurostat (2019), only 10.2% of children less than three years old were enrolled in nurseries; according to the Supreme Audit Office (NIK, 2019), in almost half of the municipalities, there were problems with the availability of nurseries: The number of applications exceeded the number of places by 30–60% on average. Grandparental care remains a social norm, with 70% of grandmothers agreeing that grandparents should look after their grandchildren (Wilińska et al., 2019).

Furthermore, historically, the welfare system used to be focused solely on mothers and maternity, and perceived women as both mothers and employees, while men had no significant rights connected to fatherhood. Only in 2010 were fathers included in the welfare system directly; this was the year when one week (later two weeks) of paternity leave was established. Although the uptake of paternity leave increased significantly (see Figure 1), there has not been much change in recent years. Overall, the uptake of paternity leave is significant but limited, despite it being paid (100%), short and relatively flexible, as it may be taken until the child turns two.



Figure 1. Men using paternity leave (as per the percentage of children born), 2014–2020. Source: Based on data from ZUS (2021).

In 2013, a 32-week parental leave was established. Combined with maternity leave, it gave a family approximately one year of paid leave. Compared to previous legislation, it effectively doubled the time available for parents to spend with their child. The provision was family-based with no individual quota for fathers. The financial compensation was 80% on average, and the leave could be shared by a couple in any way: One parent could take 100% of the leave, or they could take the leave simultaneously, for example. However, very few fathers (less than 2% of eligible ones) used any of the parental leave (see Figure 2). As Kurowska (2019) noted, despite being seemingly gender-neutral (Plomien, 2019), the parental leave design was (and still remains) actually mother-centred, and when implemented into the current economic and cultural context, it resulted in a strongly gendered uptake.

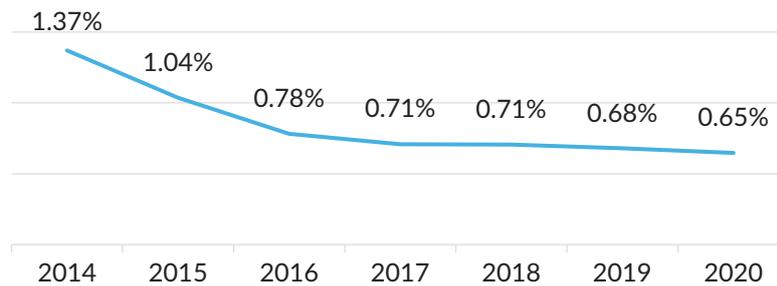


Figure 2. Men taking parental leave (as per the percentage of children born), 2014–2020. Source: Based on data from ZUS (2021).

The analysis of new leave legislation suggests that it was a result of implementing the EU regulations concerning the equal treatment in access to employment (Serafin, 2016). In this context, the lack of “use it or lose it” fathers’ quota in the parental leave in Poland in 2019 (at the time of my interviews) is not surprising—especially because, when such a quota was finally introduced in 2023, it was the delayed implementation of the EU directive from 2019 concerning work–life balance.

Overall, it can be said that the Polish welfare state offers “freedom of choice” by implementing formally gender-neutral legislation. At the same time, there is limited institutional support for fathers as carers, both in terms of public governmental communication and in terms of social norms.

3. Sample and Methodology

The empirical base of this study consists of 74 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews with partners from 37 heterosexual couples conducted in 2019 in Poland. Bearing in mind problems with the recruitment of men to family-related projects (e.g., Kilkey et al., 2013), I started by drawing on personal networks built through traditionally male hobbies, as it was easier to convince men to participate when we already had common friends and interests. I also published my advertisement in the local newspaper in Warsaw, and in online form on my Facebook account, as well as on a reselling website. However, it was hard to find less affluent and less-educated couples. To gain a sufficient number of respondents without university-level education and living in smaller localities, ensuring a variety of perspectives, I combined purposive sampling of looking for more involved fathers, with snowballing.

During my research, I noticed differences between couples living in towns and villages, small cities, and large cities. I included these characteristics together with information on education, occupation, income, number of children, and age of the youngest child in the Supplementary File. The gender of respondents and their interviewee number are indicated at each direct interview quote: For example, M22 refers to male interviewee number 22. In this article, I focus on dual-earner couples with at least one child six years of age or younger, so there are some numbers missing, as I excluded from the original sample couples with older children. Most of the recruited couples had only one or two children, because I was particularly interested in the moment of transition to parenthood, and negotiations of intra-family division of labour. When, in the Supplementary File, the number of children is presented as 1.5, it means that the mother was, at the time of interview, pregnant with her second child. There is also some missing data in several responses, as I have prioritised having interviews over gathering all characteristics of my respondents.

There are some limitations to my dataset. Firstly, the sample is still skewed towards more affluent and better-educated people living in large cities. To be more precise, among my respondents, 58 had a higher (university-level) education and 16 did not. Similarly, 30 couples lived in large cities, two in small cities, and five in towns or villages. Secondly, all the interviews were gathered in 2019. Ideally, I would have liked to talk to my respondents at various points in time, including prior to the birth of their first child, and I would also want to talk to some couples who had a child after the introduction of the “use it or lose it” fathers’ quota, to check how it influenced their perspective on sharing parental leave.

I applied thematic analysis to my interview data, which allowed enough flexibility to acknowledge theoretical concepts without discarding original narratives. I developed the first version of the code tree together with my interview guide. Therefore, my initial code tree was driven by theory and previous research on gender division of labour; however, as I included new codes during analysis, I also used elements of a “bottom-up” approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All the interviews were conducted by me personally, similarly to the analysis and translations.

4. Findings

4.1. Men as Providers

The concept of traditional fatherhood was understood as providing financially for children and the family. Men among my respondents generally perceived their employment and income as a matter of great importance. They felt responsible for the financial situation of the family, even though their partners were also working full-time. The birth of a child was often seen as a starting point for their new motivations regarding employment. Men were usually able to pursue their careers and continue to work full-time, often with overtime. Some of them started to value the stability of employment much more than prior to having children, as they felt the responsibility for dependents, while before they could prioritise the excitement of having a new job and new challenges:

It was no longer [about] purely egoistic motivations regarding career, development, [or] some kind of pleasure. It was more...work was supposed to provide me [with]....I started to think about work as an activity that would ensure financial stability....[And] the employer also seemed...to know that I [was] a bit more predictable because of it. [Once] there [was] a pregnancy already...I knew, from that moment on, that I [would] work because I [had] to. That I must bring [in the] money. (M22)

The tendency for men to feel responsible for the financial well-being of their families becomes more visible when the material situation is somehow “lacking.” Less affluent men among my respondents often underscored the necessity of overtime or additional work to guarantee the financial stability of their families. They perceived their paid employment as a burden, especially if they had to take on an additional job in the evening or on weekends:

I just don’t want to worry about what will happen, and I want to have the possibility to not work so much. Not to go [to work] also on weekends to earn extra money. (M30)

This is coherent with older data showing that Polish fathers want to work as many as fifty-six hours per week; authors of previous studies attributed this preference to financial insecurity, rather than actual preferences (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009). Although the economic situation in Poland has improved since then, people in Poland often work long hours, and overtime is common and often expected, especially in well-paid jobs. My respondents still talked about the financial challenges of having children, and men often feel pressured to earn more money.

However, after families achieve financial stability, many women actually support limiting the working hours of their partners (especially overtime). Some even advocate for it, voicing the need for more childcare support:

Before the wedding, we talked about the fact that, if we were to start a family and we want to have children, I do not agree to be a single mother. I mean...he can work 250 hours a month or more, and there is simply [not] an option. He had to find a job with normal hours. I mean, say, about 200 hours a month. [If he is working] 250 [hours], I am a single mother. (F26)

A significant number of fathers among my respondents mentioned that their partners wanted them to change their jobs to be able to participate more in childcare and family life, and they often decided to follow their advice. For some women, advocating for fewer working hours for their husbands was harder:

As for his employment....Each job change, or even planning for some additional hours, we always try to agree on [it] together. Because we know that it's not just about his free time anymore. This is family time....It annoyed me [when he took additional work] because he simply did not have the time to rest. So he was unhappy. It meant that we had him tired [at home too]. Also, I was annoyed sometimes by the fact that people at work [had] 100% of him, right? Because he sacrifices himself. And when he comes home, he is *just here*, right? A wreck of a man. So it made me upset sometimes. (F07)

This female respondent did not want to have a “wreck of a man” in her house; the additional working hours were discussed by the couple and later reduced.

4.2. Fathers Bonding With Children

Overall, mothers expressed the need for fathers' involvement. This was particularly visible among affluent couples, but also true for women with lower incomes, and living in smaller localities, who are generally more traditional:

[Earning money] is as important as staying at home, spending time with children, and caring for his wife. It is all of the same importance. (F14)

He works a lot, as much as possible. I do not approve....It means [he has] less time for us and for [the] children. He is very tired, and they do not spend enough time with him....I think we could spend less money, live frugally, but not be at work all the time. (F30)

It is no longer acceptable for fathers to just earn money; they are at least expected to bond with their children and have a relationship with them, even if not to provide daily one-to-one childcare. Historically, men in Poland

were not expected to do daily childcare, especially around babies. This is still visible among the generation of grandparents:

Yes, grandfathers try [to help], but they leave women's things to women, as my father-in-law put it. He comes when it suits him and he plays with our son. But he never feeds him, never changes nappies, never puts him to sleep. He can help with some light stuff, and he wants to, but nothing more. My father is similar. (F32)

In this aspect, there is a clear intergenerational change among Polish men. My respondents, even those less educated and living in smaller localities, clearly voiced their care and love for their children and declared their willingness to participate in childcare:

I want it to be better [than in my family's house from childhood]. In every way...financially, [but also] more family time, I want to be present at home. (M40)

The current generation of fathers underscored how important the relationship with their children is for them. This shows the intergenerational move from traditional fatherhood, focused on financial providing, towards more involved fatherhood. Indeed, following Lamb's (1987) typology, "interactive childcare" is necessary to bond with a child. However, "accessibility" is not only less common but also less feasible for fathers in the early years of their children's lives, as they generally spend much less time with babies and toddlers in comparison to mothers. The difference is not only due to the individual preferences of fathers in comparison to mothers, but also to the couple's choices based on their socio-economic situation. Gender roles are also reinforced by the existing institutional factors.

4.3. Institutional Support for Fatherhood

The need for fathers to bond with their children is recognised by the Polish state, e.g., by providing paternity leave. The leave is much shorter than maternity leave, yet it recognizes that fathers are also parents, and they should spend some time with their baby and the new mother. Among my respondents, the vast majority of fathers took paternity leave, and most of them spent the first two weeks of their child's life at home with their families:

Yes, yes, yes, yes. He immediately used it [the paternity leave]. It was because I [had] a caesarean, so I also needed male care with lifting, carrying, etc., because, obviously, after surgery, not all activities can be done. (F29)

What is particularly interesting in the quote above is the expression "male care" and its association with physical strength. There was also no mention of childcare. That does not mean that the fathers did not engage with their children. On the contrary, the two-weeks of paternity leave gave them time to adjust to a new role. Unlike many of their own fathers, they learnt how to change diapers and provide basic care to their babies. However, they did not become the primary carer during that time. They often engaged in domestic labour, but it was mostly not connected with the child itself, and was seen as helping the mother during difficult times:

No, my paternity was used for holidays [together as a family]. But still, after birth, I immediately took the usual two weeks [of paid annual leave] to be with them, to spend time with them. Just to see how to do things and make friends [with the baby]. (M01)

Overall, paternity leave supports the engagement of fathers, but it does not undermine the pre-existing gender structure with different gender roles in providing care to a young child. Rather, it is seen and used as a time for the family to be together, and for a father to bond with a child. The mother—even when the father is active—may be solely responsible for the more demanding tasks, which are seen as requiring the mother’s “special abilities.” She is usually not only the main carer, but also the more capable one.

This cultural difference in expectations regarding motherhood and fatherhood is also very visible in terms of the uptake of parental leave. Even among my respondents, most of whom are highly educated and employed full-time (at least prior to having children), only four fathers took some parental leave. What is more, the majority of my respondents did not even have a proper discussion about sharing the parental leave: They both just “naturally” assumed that the mother would become a primary carer and take the leave. Two main reasons were given to support this decision. The first one concerns the ability to fulfil the biological needs of the child. The choice of breastfeeding based mostly on health reasons was presented as leading to the whole childcare arrangement during the first year of the child’s life. The second was a set of economic arguments linked to employment, mainly, but not exclusively, a difference in salaries:

It was obvious. We know each other’s salaries and, due to financial issues, it was clear that I am taking the leave. Anyway, it was natural for both of us that during these first months I would be the one looking after the child. I’m just breastfeeding, right? It was so natural that it was out of the question [to be otherwise]. (F15)

In the accounts of the respondents, I found indications that economic reasons were often used as additional justification for something that had already been decided, which supports my previous claim that they are a rationalisation of a decision previously made. What is more, in many cases—like in the example below—there was no negotiation prior to decision-making, which suggests that parents were simply following social expectations, so there was no need to have a verbal discussion about the topic:

No, we didn’t think about it. Somehow it came [to us] both...that I was the one staying at home...We didn’t even have to discuss it. We did not take [anything else] into account. We have approached this traditionally. (F14)

On the other hand, some parents actually considered sharing parental leave, but decided against it due to the predicted negative reaction of the father’s employer. It is generally true that employers in Poland are unaccustomed to men taking longer leaves, and fathers may be met with subtle discrimination (Dančíková & Muter, 2026). Mothers are met with similar reactions in reverse. One of my respondents decided to come back to work after seven months of combined maternity and parental leave, and she recalled family members protesting and making her feel like an irresponsible and egoistic mother who cares for herself more than for the well-being of her child. Fathers were not met with similar judgment. For example, her partner did not mention any pressure to take up the remaining parental leave. The existing gender structure is visible not only in the form of formal institutions but also in the form of gender norms and expectations, which are different for mothers and fathers.

Overall, maternity and parental leave in Poland are often treated by parents as one leave. They are also clearly connected to the mother in the societal perception. Actually, some mothers among my respondents clearly voiced that it would be difficult for them to leave the child earlier, even if the father decided to become a primary carer:

I definitely wouldn't want to go back any earlier. I believe that the first year of a child's life is very important for building a relationship with the mother....A mother should decide by herself [if she wants to go back to work earlier]....However, my husband often saw that I was tired and said: "Listen. Maybe I'll stay, maybe you can go to work." (F28)

Therefore, parental leaves in Poland do not shift existing gender structure and perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood. The vast majority of mothers take all available maternity and parental leaves, a situation that is "taken for granted by most parents and not questioned" (Suwada, 2021, p. 38). This practice reinforces the existing gender structure and different ways of providing childcare by men and women. It is even more of a concern due to the lack of sufficient public nurseries (NIK, 2019) and the general perception that they are of low quality (Szelewa, 2019). After one year of strict gender specialisation, with mothers "staying at home" and being primary carers, and fathers continuing their employment, or even taking overtime to support the rising economic needs of their growing families, it becomes more difficult to change the status quo. None of my respondents seriously considered, at this stage, replacing the mother with the father as primary carer, when neither nurseries nor grandparental care were available:

I wanted to go back to work, because for me it was important and I needed it. [But] unfortunately, all the money I had had to be for the nursery, so in the end I preferred to stay with my child at home rather than work. (F13)

Indeed, the cost of childcare is compared solely to the mother's income, as, by default, it is the mother who alternatively stays at home with a child. This assumption is so strong that none of my respondents mentioned the father's salary in this context. Further, the pressure on mothers to actually stay at home may be significant due to the "norm of threeness" (Saxonberg, 2014). Therefore, it is clear that an insufficient supply of public nurseries reinforces the gender division of labour and the status quo established during parental leave. In most cases, couples living in villages have particularly restricted choices, as they are often less affluent and the nearest public nursery is often in another locality, without proper public transport available. This reinforces the existing division between the more traditional countryside and the more "progressive" cities.

4.4. Fathers' Choices

The limited institutional support for involved fatherhood does not mean that individual fathers cannot take advantage of the formally gender-equal provisions regarding parental leaves, at least as long as they have supportive partners. As I was looking for respondents with an atypical division of labour, some fathers actually took part in the parental leave, and this clearly changed the status quo for particular couples and supported their engagement in gender equality. One father became the primary carer, mostly because his partner had a great opportunity to return to work in a better, and well-paid position. He "stayed at home" longer and slowly started to work gigs when the child was older, and when the mother could provide care. A second father also became a primary carer, and also took over the role after the first six months, which "belonged" to the mother.

However, this couple decided to share equally, and they carefully engaged in a double-earner-carer model of division of labour. On the other hand, two other fathers took the parental leave because it was financially beneficial. They wanted to change their careers, and used that time to start engaging with the new workplace. They were never primary carers, as either the mother still did not return to work full-time, or a third person came to help. These fathers still probably engaged more with their children, thanks to using the parental leave, but the gender division of labour remained in place.

Most of the fathers among my respondents spend some quality time with their children; they take babies and toddlers for walks, play, and interact with them. However, they choose very different levels of engagement in daily caring activities. Some men are recognised as active fathers by their partners, and they are very proud of their relationship with their children:

I am satisfied when I come back [from work] and my son runs [to me], and....My mother [grandmother taking care of the child] says that the intercom rings and [there is], "dad-dad-mum-mum, dad-dad-mum-mum." He doesn't know who is coming and...there is no difference, no mum first, dad later....The door opens and there is: "Mum!" The door opens and there is: "Dad!" Whoever walks in, there is joy. (M20)

However, most men are somewhere in between traditional fathers and equal partners. Their level of engagement is limited, but it usually gets higher when their child gets older, especially after a new child is born. Fathers also start to do more when their partners come back to full-time employment:

Clearly, when children were young, I mostly stayed at home. I took maternity and parental leave. I stayed at home. Now [when I work and I have an additional project on my own], he spends much more technical time with them. He always spent time with them, but it was more play....Now it is more [than just that]. Even before, it was not always me changing nappies [or] cooking meals for children. It was flexible. When there was a need, he did it, too. (F33)

The "technical time" mentioned above resembles Lamb's (1987) "accessibility time," when domestic labour is done alongside childcare, or childcare includes some domestic labour like food preparation. Overall, men are much less likely to be available to children in this way, as they are less likely to perform routine housework. What is more, some fathers actually mentioned that they found it impossible to multitask in this way, especially with babies and toddlers.

The disproportional engagement of women in childcare starts very early, as noticed by Żadkowska (2016). Most of the future mothers among my respondents used the time during pregnancy to learn more about parenting. They actively sought out scientific knowledge and opinions of experienced parents. At the same time, most future fathers did not feel that it was necessary, or they were just happy that the work was being done by somebody else:

I think it would be fair to say that, when it comes to the intellectual preparation for parenting, it was definitely [wife's name]'s job. She generally thinks a lot, and she always plans in advance. As soon as she found out that she was pregnant, she ordered some books on this subject and started reading. It bored me too much, so I thought she would read and tell me what it was about. So she did a lot, a lot

of valuable work, because I would probably do things just like my parents and the people around me did. (M24)

Most of my male respondents learnt almost all of the childcare tasks, but they usually relied on their partners to show them how to perform them. They were also much less likely to attend to the physical needs of babies, as that labour was done by mothers. Even involved fathers, educated and living in cities, did not usually participate in all types of care. For a father with a newborn, it often meant not being engaged with soothing the baby (justified with a phrase that the baby “wants the mother”) and participating mostly in specific tasks which are done ad hoc (like sterilising bottles or changing a nappy). Some fathers even described themselves as naturally incapable of doing certain tasks:

Of course, we quickly decided who was doing what with the child. Traditionally, I would say. That is, I [did] baths, but [wife's name] was the most important in terms of going to sleep, feeding....Well, this is due to nature, but there were some things that I did with the baby, like giving [it] bath or helping with some things, like sterilizing bottles. Probably not enough, considering how much work there was and how tired she was. But I tried to participate as much as my strengths allowed. (M26)

Another type of task, which was often done only by the mother, was taking care of the needs of the child during the night. It was justified by my respondents both by biological differences (breastfeeding) and their agreed division of labour. Parents often considered it was more important for a man to be rested, due to his involvement with the labour market. Women were generally staying at home and domestic labour was considered less important (or less impacted negatively by lack of sleep).

Even for toddlers and older children, some tasks, like introducing new foods, choosing clothes, and trimming nails, were done overwhelmingly by mothers:

Both of us look after children, but in different ways. I mean, I do not know how to brush [their] hair....My wife does that. On the other hand, I am responsible for bringing them to preschool and back every day. It takes 40 minutes, at least. And I worked with our son [2nd child] recently, about the school....I can outsource, organize, etc. But with a young child, it is obvious. There is the mother. It is natural. (M10)

There was also a strong gender component present in how the childcare was shared by partners. It was both correlated with the age of the child and dependent on the type of task. Many men participated in driving children to (pre)school and some helped them with homework (especially older children with “male” subjects, like mathematics or physics).

Overall, it was easier for fathers to opt out (Eerola et al., 2021; Miller, 2011; Rose et al., 2015) from particular tasks related to childcare, which they perceived as harder or less interesting. Men were also mostly “helping” their partners, rather than taking full responsibility for children’s well-being. For example, fathers were usually unaware of the vaccine calendar for their children. They rarely took their children to doctors’ appointments alone. They were often assigned to perform particular tasks, which were already pre-arranged. For example, they could drive a child to preschool, but most likely their child’s lunch was already waiting for them in the fridge, their clothes for the day were prepared near the bed. Overall, women managed and organised a bulk of domestic labour, including childcare:

At some later stage, we had also had a big conflict about mental load, right? The work which is done mostly by [my wife] and which I do not engage with so much, because I am always tired, because I have such a job, etc. So, I started to take more responsibility for thinking about meals and planning things in advance. (M26)

Although few men showed direct recognition of the mental load carried by their partners, most of my male respondents were grateful to women for organising everything. Indeed, many of my respondents—both mothers and fathers—mentioned this need to plan everything around children, as their largest challenge connected with the transition to parenthood. Therefore, the “responsibility” aspect of childcare (Lamb, 1987) should not be underestimated.

5. Discussion

Overall, motherhood and fatherhood are very different ways of experiencing parenthood in contemporary Poland. Through my respondents’ experiences, I capture the transition from more traditional parenthood focused on financially providing for children to more intensive parenting practices focused on emotional care, as described by Sarnowska and Pustułka (2024). These changes were supported in the Polish context by adapting the EU legislation, which promoted gender equality. Similarly, an improving economic situation helped with this cultural change, as fulfilling the most basic needs of children became easier with time, and fewer fathers needed to work overtime. There is a visible difference between cities and smaller locations in terms of how great cultural changes regarding involved fatherhood are. In towns and villages, traditional gender roles are more prevalent, and some fathers, mostly men without university-level education, still see themselves as providers; they do not spend a lot of time with their families.

For most fathers, emotional engagement with children is important, and there is a strong intergenerational change: Fathers value their relationship with children and invest in it. At the same time, fathers often opt out of more routine, practical childcare activities, especially with babies. Following the typology offered by Lamb (1987), they generally do not take full “responsibility” for childcare, as they do not become primary carers, even for short periods of time. Fathers can choose (more freely than their partners) their level of involvement with children, in terms of time and the type of tasks they participate in. They are particularly active in playing with children and doing sports. Fathers being relatively free to choose their level of involvement is consistent with previous research, and only possible because they know that their partners will take care of the child’s needs if they fail to do so; women are actually “responsible” for children’s well-being. What is more, fathers rarely multitask, i.e., are not “accessible” to children and supervise them while doing routine housework. On the other hand, fathers learnt to perform almost all childcare tasks, significantly more so than their own fathers. Therefore, they were able to take responsibility for children’s well-being at times when it was considered necessary—for example, during a medical emergency, or when the mother was going back to work and was overwhelmed by her other responsibilities. Also, fathers often engage in “interactive” childcare and spend quality time with their children. However, although most fathers are not the sole breadwinners, they feel responsible for the financial stability of the family, especially when they are not able to do that as well as expected. Usually, significant limitation of working hours is initiated by their partners, who want them to be more engaged in family life. This shows that, overall, the highly gendered intra-family division of labour is still the lived reality of most families, and challenging the existing gender structure (Risman, 2017) is not easy.

My findings are similar to Takács' (2020) findings about Hungary, who noticed the influence of post-socialist institutions on the persistence of gender order in Hungary, and Dančíková's (2025), who described how gender structure limits the uptake of leaves by fathers in Slovakia. In comparison to Russia (Rebrey, 2023), with only 3–4% of households where fathers do both housework and childcare, Polish fathers seem to be more involved, although they usually remain “helpers,” similarly to Russians. Still, there are strong signals that Polish fathers engage more and more with daily childcare, as in Slovenia (Švab & Humer, 2026). Overall, CEE countries share similar gender structures and, therefore, family policy and institutional support for involved fatherhood are important for how quickly and widely new cultural norms are adopted. This article provides an empirical contribution by exploring the patterns of involved fatherhood in Poland. Conceptually, it uses Lamb's (1987) typology of engagement with children to show gradual changes in fatherhood practices, and therefore in gender structure (Risman, 2017).

In the Polish context, paternity leave supports the recognition of fathers as parents and allows fathers to bond with their newborn children and help their partners after childbirth. However, they are not challenging existing gender structure, as they do not encourage fathers to become primary carers for their children. Similarly, the narratives of my respondents confirm that the seemingly gender-neutral parental leave not only leads to a strongly gendered uptake (Plomien, 2019), but also that they are experienced and understood by the majority of my respondents as the right and responsibility of the mother (Kurowska, 2019; Suwada, 2015, 2021). As such, using the framework proposed by O'Brien and Wall (2017), parental leave in its current form does not reinforce gender equity or shift perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood, although it allows parents with more gender-equal values to practice involved fatherhood. Overall, “the Polish father is not the main recipient of parental benefits and is not seen by society as a caregiver; rather, he is regarded as an additional carer whose role is to support a tired mother” (Suwada, 2015, p. 477). Therefore, individual fathers may become primary carers with the support of the state, but the state does not promote involved fatherhood or gender-equality in the division of domestic labour. Indeed, the long leaves with strong gender uptake reinforce existing gender structure.

Due to the gender division of labour established during maternity and parental leaves among the vast majority of Polish families, and combined with the “norm of threeness” (Saxonberg, 2014), there is pressure on mothers to stay at home after the leaves. This is combined with insufficient provision of public nurseries—particularly prevalent in the countryside (NIK, 2019), and the low perception of quality of childcare provided by them (Szelewa, 2019). Therefore, the “childcare gap” again results in reinforcing the gender order and the differences between motherhood and fatherhood.

Overall, the current gender structure as understood by Risman (2017) is not seriously challenged by the formal institutions of the Polish state. Therefore, there is no strong political support for the involved fatherhood. It is allowed on an individual level, but not supported structurally. With traditional values still relatively strong in Poland, also due to the significance of the Polish Catholic Church, the change in gender roles is slow, especially among parents. Still, there is some change, and there is value in showing how gender structure is both resistant to change and susceptible to it long-term, especially when it is structurally encouraged. Due to changes to parental leave policy in 2023, with the introduction of nine weeks “use it or lose it” fathers' quota, there is ample opportunity for further research.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The raw data supporting the conclusions of the article will be made available by the author upon request.

Supplementary Material

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

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