

# Involved Fatherhood Among Roma Men: Class, Kinship, and Caring Masculinities in Post-Socialist Hungary

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## Abstract

Scholarship on fatherhood has increasingly emphasised men’s practical and emotional involvement in childcare; yet, this research has largely focused on majority middle-class populations. Roma fathers in Hungary are often stereotyped from a deficit view, and their practices remain underexplored. This article draws on two qualitative projects: (a) long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a marginalised, lower-class Roma settlement in Northern Hungary; and (b) narrative life-history interviews with first-in-family graduate Roma fathers. Four case studies—two working-class Roma fathers and two graduate Roma fathers—are presented as theoretical narratives. The working-class fathers enact involved fatherhood through alternative forms of caring masculinities, in which physical protection, emotional expressiveness, pragmatic acts of provision (breadwinning), and kinship-based solidarity are the main modes of fatherly care under economically precarious conditions. In contrast, the graduate fathers mobilise cultural capital, institutional knowledge, and reflexive parenting repertoires, as well as the transmission of a recast Roma identity, even in non-residential contexts. The comparison shows that their practices are not dichotomous but form a continuum of involved fatherhood, shaped by classed resources, kinship ties, and the experience of racialisation. The study demonstrates that Roma fatherhood in post-socialist Hungary is not absent nor deficient; rather, it is diverse and class-stratified, ranging from emotionally and physically protective kinship-based masculinities to intimate, education-oriented practices, with each representing meaningful forms of care under conditions of racialised precarity. The article contributes to international debates on involved fatherhood, caring masculinities, and racialised minority fatherhood beyond middle-class benchmarks.

## Keywords

caring masculinities; intimate fathering; involved fatherhood; kinship and care; minority mobility; post-socialist Hungary; racialised fatherhood; Roma fathers

## 1. Introduction

Fatherhood has become a focus for rethinking masculinities, care, and gender relations in contemporary societies. Across Europe, scholarship has highlighted the growing importance of involved fatherhood, with men increasingly expected to participate in family life not only as breadwinners but also as emotionally present and practically engaged caregivers (Dermott, 2008; Hanlon, 2012; Johansson & Andreasson, 2017; Makay & Spéder, 2018; Takács, 2020). However, as key studies show, these dominant ideals are primarily drawn from majority middle-class populations. Far less attention has been given to how involved fatherhood is imagined and practised among racially stigmatised minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (Dermott & Pomati, 2016).

In Hungary, Roma men are often stereotyped as absent or irresponsible fathers in public discourse and policy. Such deficit narratives obscure the diverse ways Roma men enact responsibility, presence, and care under conditions of poverty, discrimination, and precarity. Moreover, parenting research in Hungary has primarily focused on majority populations (e.g., Makay & Spéder, 2018; Takács, 2020), meaning that the fathering practices of Roma men remain comparatively underexplored.

Addressing this gap and situating the analysis in post-socialist Hungary, this article highlights how the legacies of economic restructuring, welfare retrenchment, and shifting educational opportunities shape the conditions in which Roma men negotiate involved fatherhood. It compares the fathering practices of two groups of Roma men living in the same county in Northern Hungary: (a) low-educated fathers with eight grades of schooling, living in a marginalised rural community, and (b) university-educated first-in-family (FIF) graduates residing in middle-sized urban settlements with more educational and employment opportunities. By juxtaposing these social groups, the article examines how class position (measured by educational attainment), kinship networks, and labour market opportunities condition the meanings and practices of involved fatherhood among these Roma men.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on two research projects: (a) my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a rural, marginalised Roma community in Northern Hungary that I call Lápos, and (b) a qualitative interview study with FIF graduate Roma fathers. (All settlements' and interviewees' names are fictional or changed to ensure the anonymity of the study participants.) Using four ethnographic case studies (two from each project), the article examines how different forms of caring masculinities emerge in relation to differing structural constraints, aspirations, and educational and cultural resources.

The article argues that involved fatherhood (as my protagonists understand it) among the Roma in post-socialist Hungary is neither absent nor deficient; rather, it is diverse and class-stratified—ranging from protective, kinship-based masculinities to intimate, education-oriented practices—with each representing meaningful forms of care under conditions of racialised precarity. Consequently, it contributes to three areas of scholarship: (a) involved fatherhood and intimate masculinities, (b) racialised and minority men's caring practices, and (c) social mobility and middle-class minorities in post-socialist Europe.

By highlighting the everyday practices of Roma fathers who consider themselves “good fathers,” which, in their view, entails being involved in their children's lives and physically and emotionally caring for them, this article challenges dominant deficit narratives that cast minority men as absent or irresponsible. It shows that

Roma men, across class positions, actively negotiate the demands of work, kinship, and care to enact meaningful forms of fatherhood. Consequently, the article broadens the conceptualisation of involved fatherhood beyond middle-class norms, situates involved fatherhood and caring masculinities within the racialised and post-socialist dynamics of Hungary, and contributes to international debates on racialised minority fatherhood, kinship, and social mobility.

By comparing these two groups, the article does not treat working-class and graduate Roma fathers as occupying opposite poles; rather, it considers them part of a continuum of involved fatherhood. The forms this involvement takes—whether kinship-based solidarity and protective strength or attachment, education, and the transmission of cultural capital—are shaped by classed resources, labour market opportunities, and the racialised contexts in which these men live and parent.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Caring Masculinities, Kinship, and Minority Fatherhood

### 2.1. Involved Fatherhood and Caring Masculinity

Scholarship on fatherhood has increasingly emphasised the growing importance of involved fatherhood as both a social norm and a lived practice. Miller's (2011) study of first-time fathers in the UK clearly shows how younger generations are reshaping the perception of "good fatherhood." In this view, involved fatherhood is gradually becoming the "societal default position" to which modern fathers are expected to conform (Dermott, 2008).

Some scholarship (see Takács, 2020, among others) has used the term "involved fatherhood" interchangeably with Hanlon's (2012) notion of *caring masculinity*. In many contexts, fathers are now expected not only to provide financially but also to be emotionally present and practically engaged in childcare (Dermott, 2003; Hobson & Morgan, 2002). This reconfiguration of paternal roles is often analysed through the lens of caring masculinities—masculinity forms as valued male identities that reject domination and instead emphasise affective relations, responsibility, the provision of love, equal sharing of care work between fathers and mothers, intensive parenting, and solidarity (Hanlon, 2012; see also Elliott, 2016).

Part of the recent shift towards caring masculinity in fathering practices is the salient prevalence of intimate fathering. Dermott (2008) conceptualises intimate fathering as the cultivation of emotional closeness and everyday intimacy with children, often expressed through time spent together, conversation, and shared activities such as helping with schoolwork. This perspective also broadens the understanding of fatherhood beyond material provision, emphasising that being a "good father" is increasingly associated with affective ties and responsiveness to children's needs. However, such ideals remain grounded in majority middle-class populations, which risks universalising a narrow model of "good fatherhood." In this model, the central dilemma becomes the "earning versus caring" question (Koslowski, 2011, as cited in Takács, 2020).

This article applies the concepts of involved fatherhood and caring masculinities in a way that is sensitive to the social and economic realities of Roma men in Hungary. Rather than adopting ideal-typical, middle-class formulations in which involved fatherhood implies an equal sharing of care work, intensive parenting, and emotional expressivity, I define paternal involvement more broadly as the meaningful mobilisation of material, emotional, and relational resources for children's well-being. In the contexts examined here, involvement may

include steady breadwinning, protective presence, emotional communication, kin-based cooperation, or the transmission of cultural capital and ethnic identity.

Similarly, caring masculinities are not considered a universal moral ideal but a set of practices through which men orient themselves towards responsibility, nurturance, and relationality within the constraints and possibilities of their environments. Drawing on Elliott (2016), I understand caring masculinity as relational and context-dependent and recognise that racialised labour markets, precarity, and limited institutional support shape both the forms and the emotional repertoires of fathering available to men. Thus, in this article, a father may be considered involved or caring even when their practices do not align with middle-class models of intensive parenting; instead, involvement is assessed according to locally meaningful expressions of commitment, care, solidarity, and presence—or as the protagonists of the case studies articulate, “being there” for their children and “responding to children’s physical and emotional needs” (see also Williams, 2009 on low-income, African Caribbean fathers in the UK).

This approach explicitly acknowledges the middle-class bias embedded in much of the Euro-American literature on caring masculinity and involved fatherhood. By situating these concepts within the lived realities of Roma men, I show how fathering practices that may appear partial, inconsistent, or non-normative when measured against mainstream benchmarks can be coherent forms of care in contexts marked by poverty, racialisation, and constrained agency.

## **2.2. Kinship and Care**

Anthropological and sociological research has shown that in both premodern and traditional societies, childcare is never the sole responsibility of parents but is embedded within wider kinship and solidarity networks (Chamberlain, 1999). Carol Stack’s classic study *All Our Kin* (Stack, 1974) demonstrated how African American families experiencing poverty relied on dense kinship ties for childrearing and survival, reframing kinship as a flexible and collective resource. Similar dynamics have been observed among Roma families, in which extended kin often play a crucial role in daily childcare, economic support, and crisis management (Fleck & Rughiniş, 2008; Kovai, 2017). By foregrounding kinship, this article emphasises that Roma fatherhood cannot be understood solely within the nuclear family but must be situated within broader relational fields of kinship.

## **2.3. Racialised Minority and Roma Fatherhoods**

Research on minority and racialised fathers complicates the dominant narratives on masculinity and fatherhood. For example, studies of African American and African Caribbean fathers have shown how men negotiate stigma and structural exclusion while enacting care and responsibility (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Nelson et al., 2002; Williams, 2009). Nelson et al.’s (2002) ethnography of inner-city fathers in Philadelphia shows how low-income, non-custodial African American fathers remain involved in their children’s lives despite major structural barriers (including unemployment, unstable housing, incarceration, conflict with mothers, and restrictive child support systems). The authors challenge the stereotype of “absent Black fathers,” arguing that these men often maintain deep emotional commitments and engage in care whenever circumstances allow. They devised the term “fragile fatherhood” among low-income African American men as emerging from economic marginality and institutional and relational volatility (including unstable

partnerships and housing precarity). They show that even when men face fragile structural conditions, they often remain deeply committed to their children, framing fatherhood, however fragile, as central to their identity.

The Roma cases presented in this article reveal a different configuration of fragility. In the rural settlement of Lapos, one of the sites of this case study, romantic relationships are highly stable: Many couples form in adolescence and remain together into adulthood, sustained by longstanding norms concerned with early romantic partnering and the value placed on women's chastity. Housing is also relatively secure, supported by state-subsidised rural housing allowances and kinship-based residential solutions (Durst, 2006). Thus, the fragility of Roma fatherhood does not stem from relational breakdown or housing insecurity but from economic marginality and racialised precarity. Roma fathers' involvement is constrained not by family dissolution but by limited labour market opportunities, exhausting work regimes, and enduring anti-Roma discrimination. This comparison also demonstrates that "fragile fatherhood" is not a universal model but is a context-specific outcome of structural conditions. For the Roma, as my case studies show, fatherhood is relationally stable but structurally fragile, providing an important refinement of existing theories of minority fatherhood under constraint.

Nevertheless, the broad conceptual insights from African American fragile fatherhood resonate with Roma men's experiences in Hungary, where racialisation and economic marginality constrain but do not eliminate paternal involvement. In an ethnographic account of parenting in a low-resource Roma community, Kovai (2017) argues that the vulnerable structural position of the Roma in Hungary—characterised by oppression and a permanent state of deficit—becomes a "cultural pattern" in childrearing. In these contexts, the unconditional giving and immediate response to children's needs is viewed as the ultimate expression of parental love: "This is how parents respond to a permanent state of structural deficit by placing the burden of filling this deficit on their own shoulders" (Kovai, 2017, p. 218).

Other studies have further highlighted the role of Roma parents in their children's schooling (Ceglédi, 2012) and how educational trajectories reshape family roles and gender expectations among FIF Roma graduates (Dés, 2021). However, despite these contributions, few studies have systematically compared fathering practices across Roma communities stratified by education and class position. This article aims to fill this gap.

### 3. Research Context: The Situation of Roma in Hungary

Historically, the Roma or *cigány* (the latter meaning "Gypsy," as many self-identify in my field research sites) have been among the most stigmatised, disadvantaged, and vulnerable, racialised minority groups in Europe, against whom "racism is a common sense" (Kóczé, 2025). This label encompasses a highly heterogeneous population marked by socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Tremlett, 2009). Methodological challenges in data collection have complicated reliable estimates (Brüggemann, 2014; Messing, 2014); however, recent figures suggest that the Roma comprise between 7% and 8% of Hungary's population of nearly 10 million people (Hablicsek et al., 2019).

There is a broad consensus across studies (e.g., European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2025; FRA & UNDP, 2012) that Roma people in Europe occupy a structurally disadvantaged position regarding employment, housing, and access to health services. In Hungary, the Roma are mainly concentrated in

economically deprived regions, often in small villages or segregated neighbourhoods (Pénzes et al., 2018; Vajda & Dupcsik, 2008). As a stark indicator of their vulnerability, two-thirds of the Roma population are at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to 18% of the general population (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2021). Alongside material deprivation, the Roma experience entrenched prejudice and discrimination (Csepeli et al., 1998; Feischmidt et al., 2013; Simonovits & Szalai, 2013).

Inequalities are also evident in education. According to the latest findings of the FRA (2025) Roma survey carried out in 13 European countries, 34% of Roma in Hungary have completed upper secondary or vocational education (ISCED 3–5), and only 1% had achieved a degree (ISCED 6–8). As these data show, along with earlier international surveys (FRA & UNDP, 2012), across Europe, despite the expansion of higher education, the Roma remain severely underrepresented in tertiary learning. (In Hungary, around 30% of the mainstream population hold a tertiary degree [Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2021].) Initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), the European Union Roma integration framework (until 2020), and the Roma Education Fund have sought to redress this gap through targeted programmes; however, progress has been limited (Brüggemann, 2014).

Moreover, even when Roma students access higher education, they are often concentrated in the humanities and the arts and are underrepresented in STEM fields (Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017). This segmentation can hinder their labour-market competitiveness after graduation.

Recent research on FIF Roma graduates has explored how individuals “make it against the odds,” tracing distinct minority mobility trajectories and the “emotional costs” of changing class (Durst & Bereményi, 2021). Contrary to assimilationist assumptions (Bárány, 1998), most FIF Roma graduates do not simply merge into the mainstream; instead, they construct hybrid middle-class Roma identities. As studies of underrepresented racialised minority middle classes elsewhere have suggested (Neckerman et al., 1999), they navigate their lives at the intersection of class privilege and racial subordination (Archer, 2011). This often involves what Naudet (2018) terms the challenges of reconciling one’s origin class norms with those of the newly attained social group—a process that can produce the “emotional costs” of upward mobility (Reay, 2005). Challenges include alienation, “in-betweenness” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Friedman, 2016), and a sense of “dislocated” or “distabilised habitus” (Bourdieu, 2000, 2008) with a “difficulty in adjusting to the new established order” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 161) of the new (middle-class) status occupied.

One common strategy is the construction of a bicultural middle-class Roma identity that values both Hungarian and Roma cultural repertoires (Boros, 2019; Durst & Bereményi, 2021). This “double rootedness” can mitigate estrangement from the origin community, whose members may accuse academically successful Roma of “becoming Hungarian” (Nyíró, 2022). Another strategy involves building and sustaining ethnic associations and pro-Roma support programmes, which buffer against cultural dislocation and status anxiety (Boros et al., 2021). It also facilitates the recasting of Roma identity, making being Roma a source of pride rather than shame (Boros et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2020). Importantly, those whose parents have transmitted a strong sense of Roma identity tend to report greater well-being, aligning with other studies in post-socialist Europe that highlight intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity as a protective resource for racialised minority youth (Dimitrova et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2009).

Against this backdrop, this article compares Roma fathers from two distinct contexts—marginalised, low-educated men in rural villages and FIF graduates with university degrees living in small urban towns with greater educational and employment opportunities—all of whom are from the economically disadvantaged region of Northern Hungary. In doing so, it explores how educational attainment and class position shape fathering practices, masculinities, and the pursuit of involved fatherhood under racialised and socioeconomic constraints.

#### 4. Methodology

This article draws on data from two complementary research projects that together provide insights into the fathering practices of Roma men across different class positions, measured by their highest educational attainment. The first project is based on my long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out intermittently over two decades (from 2001 to the present) in a marginalised rural Roma community, which I refer to pseudonymously as “Lápos”—in one of the most deprived regions in the country in Northern Hungary. Here, the original research was designed to study the demographic behaviour and childbearing practices of marginalised and racialised minorities.

Nowadays, Lápos has become a “Gypsy village,” as the locals call it, with 820 inhabitants, including a total of only three non-Roma Hungarian nuclear families. The close-knit local community of Roma/Gypsies are all related by kinship and comprises four large extended families. The Láposians’ situation is characterised by high underemployment, pervasive poverty, and experiences of racialised exclusion. The ethnography combines a longitudinal study of participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews with families, enabling close attention to everyday life, kinship relations, and parenting practices.

The second project is a qualitative interview study that forms part of a larger, four-year research project (conducted between 2018 and 2022) that explored different education-driven social mobility trajectories, their outcomes, and their consequences for the life and subjective well-being of 165 FIF Roma and non-Roma graduates in Hungary. In this project, a team of eight researchers, comprising both Roma and non-Roma women and men, conducted semi-structured, narrative, in-depth life story interviews with people who were the first in their family to complete university (that is, whose parents did not have a degree). The interviews explored, among other things, educational trajectories, work experiences, family lives, and parenting practices. Many of the research participants were from socioeconomically disadvantaged family backgrounds. Of the 165 study participants, 103 were Roma. Among them, 32 were men with children under 18. This subsample that I analysed for the purpose of this article represents a new Roma middle class who, despite achieving academic and occupational success, must continue to navigate racialised inequalities and kinship obligations while undertaking caring fathering practices.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, de-identified to ensure participant anonymity, and coded using Atlas.ti software. The respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. Different channels were used—including our personal networks, the networks of Roma institutions, and Facebook adverts—to recruit interviewees and reduce sampling bias. As our research team comprised both women and men, and both Roma and non-Roma researchers, our personal networks for recruiting participants were relatively heterogeneous. We considered our interviewees to be Roma according to their self-identification.

The methodological combination of ethnographic immersion and narrative interviews in the two larger research projects enables a comparative analysis of fathering practices across class (as measured by participants' highest educational attainment levels). My ethnography in Lápós captures how low-educated Roma men enact involved fatherhood by demonstrating strength and emotional intimacy, while also being embedded in their kinship's solidarity and mutual aid networks in constrained, precarious settings. In contrast, the interviews with the FIF graduates highlight how higher-educated Roma men reconcile working-class and middle-class parenting ideals by combining the "natural growth" model of working-class parenting (Lareau, 2003) with mobilising their cultural capital, institutional knowledge, "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003), and reflexive middle-class parenting repertoires, as well as the transmission of a recast Roma identity, even in non-residential contexts.

The analysis proceeds through four ethnographic case studies, with two taken from the Roma community in Lápós and two from the FIF graduate sample. The four cases were selected through theoretical sampling (Burawoy, 1998), using the intensity sampling methodology (Robinson, 2014) to capture four different types of involved fatherhood—and with this, a diversity of fathering practices across class positions among Roma men. I selected cases that provide particularly insightful and information-rich examples of diverse involved fatherhood practices. Rather than seeking representativeness, the cases were chosen because they highlight key analytical contrasts—in particular, how fathers of various class positions mobilise care, responsibility, and resources under differing structural conditions. Together, these cases offer a comparative perspective on how involved fatherhood is expressed and constrained in contexts shaped by class, poverty, and mobility; that is, through differing access to economic and cultural capital under the same racialising context that Roma men are ubiquitously affected by, regardless of their class positions.

Following Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, I present these cases as theoretical narratives. As such, they are not intended to be statistically representative of Roma fatherhood, but instead seek to extend and refine theoretical debates on caring masculinities, kinship, and racialised minority fatherhood through grounded ethnographic detail. All four of the protagonists live in an economically deprived region of Northern Hungary. Another commonality is that I have developed a deep, trusted connection with each of them by following their lives over the past few years.

By applying a person-centred ethnography (cf. Jovanovic, 2025; Peternel & Maskalan, 2022), I examine, in detail, their different practices and narratives of what we can term a "caring masculinity." All of the case study subjects consider themselves to be a "good father" who is involved, in different ways—as they articulate their fatherly involvement—in "spending time with their children," "emotionally caring about them in hardships," or, in the case of the marginalised fathers, in "responding to their kids' immediate needs" (for example, feeding them whenever they are hungry, even if it is during the night; or buying them what they wish for, even if the family has been financially struggling). This perception of themselves as "good fathers" was based on comparing themselves with the men in their social circles who are, according to them, "bad fathers"—those who "[are] there only for themselves," who "leave the emotional and physical caring for their children to the mothers," or "[spend] their earnings for themselves, as they have never grown up, they only care about buying a car, or a motorcycle for themselves, even when their children lack basic necessities." However, the selected cases also exemplify how fatherly involvement is shaped by class, particularly in the context of the structural constraints of racialisation.

## 5. Findings: Alternative Caring Masculinities Among Roma Fathers

The following analysis explores how Roma fathers enact involved fatherhood across different class positions. The four case studies highlight the diverse ways that care, responsibility, and masculinity are practised under conditions of racialised precarity in post-socialist Hungary. In line with scholarship on caring masculinities, kinship, and (racialised) minority fatherhood, these cases show how Roma men reconfigure their paternal involvement through everyday strategies, which range from protective strength and breadwinning to emotional intimacy and the transmission of cultural capital and Roma identity.

The analysis first focuses on two working-class fathers from the marginalised Roma settlement of Lapos, whose practices highlight the interplay of breadwinning, kinship-based solidarity, and alternative forms of caring masculinities. It then considers two FIF graduate Roma fathers, whose accounts illustrate how upward mobility reshapes fatherhood around intimacy, education, and transmission of cultural capital. Together, the four cases provide a comparative lens to examine how class (as measured by the research participants' highest educational attainment levels), kinship, and racialisation shape involved fatherhood among Roma men.

### 5.1. Case Study 1: *Father and Son—Intimate Fatherhood in a Marginalised Roma Village*

In many racialised and marginalised Roma communities, the expression of emotions is central to demonstrating care and evaluating fatherhood (cf. Fotta, 2016; Kovai, 2017). One example is Adrián, a Roma man in his mid-20s from Lapos, a village marked by entrenched poverty and exclusion.

In a Facebook post, Adrián addressed his seven-year-old son with the following words:

My son said to me, “Which is better: to be loved or to be feared?” And I said, “Good question.” Together, both would be best, but fear is better because fear lasts longer than love. Friendship bought with money is worth nothing. So I would say, “Fear, but don’t hate.” I treat them well, but not too well. If I give them too much, they won’t need me. I give just enough so they need me, but don’t hate me. Remember what I said.

The post was accompanied by a photo of Adrián’s tattooed upper body alongside his son, captioned “heir apparent to the throne.” In this parable, Adrián framed fatherhood as both a moral lesson and a demonstration of masculine strength. His narrative is contextualised by low educational attainment and the permanent precarity that characterises the position of low-skilled Roma men in Hungary’s racialised labour market—particularly for those in remote, marginalised localities.

I have known Adrián since he was 15. I remember when he introduced me to his first (and last) romantic partner, the “love of his life,” Mimi—a beautiful girl from a neighbouring village, for whom Adrián was her first love, too. After three years of dating, Mimi, aged 18, became pregnant and gave birth to twins. Adrián was only 19, but he immediately “had to grow up,” as he explained to me at the time, owing to the breadwinning responsibilities he felt as the head of his growing family. Becoming a father was a transformative event for him, bringing purpose and emotional meaning. He experienced fatherhood as a site of dignity and identity (Coles, 2002; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Nelson et al., 2002), and he expressed a deep affection, pride, and desire to be a

“good, caring father” to his twins at that time. He was very involved in his children’s lives early on. He proudly recalled to me that he even changed their nappies, or when Mimi fell ill, he cooked the family meals following Mimi’s instructions or recipe.

After years of performing arduous menial jobs—either at the Bosch assembly line in Miskolc, “for peanuts,” or in the construction industry abroad—to support his family, Adrián abandoned enduring menial work to become his village’s informal moneylender. Though this illegal and informal business offered him an irregular income, it provided him with a better balance between work and life: between securing an income, spending more time with his children, and protecting his family’s future. It also allowed him to express his love for his children by “giving them everything they need” (fashionable clothes, toys, etc.), thus facilitating an alternate form of caring masculinity. For Roma men in the village, being a good father is patterned and described through emotions—or, as Kovai (2017) notes, through unconditional love, expressed through unconditional giving, meeting children’s immediate desires. A “good father,” in Adrián’s perception, also means embodying physical power as a protective resource for his family. This resonates with research on racialised communities elsewhere, where muscular and strong manhood is cultivated partly in response to destructive and oppressive structural forces (Fotta, 2016; Williams, 2009).

However, Adrián’s performance of strength and control should not be interpreted as the opposite of care, but rather as an alternative form of caring masculinity—adapted to local constraints and oriented towards shielding his family from economic insecurity and social exclusion. His aspirations for his children remain realistic: He hopes that his son will become a car mechanic and his daughter a nursery assistant, both stable, well-paid professions in the region. To secure a good life for them in the future, he made a significant sacrifice by rejecting the usual, comfortable solution of sending them to the local state-run public school, which has only Roma pupils. Instead, since Year 3 (age 8 in Hungary), he has driven them to a church school 40 km away each day, which is considered higher quality and is mainly attended by non-Roma children of higher status or by aspiring Roma parents. In his words, this choice protects his children from the “bad influence” of the segregated local public “all Gypsy school.” There is an expanding scholarship on the effects of the so-called “churchification” of education in Hungary. An increasing number of public schools have been taken over by one of the main Christian denominations, which enjoy greater autonomy and more favourable state funding than state-run schools. They have become the terrain of “white-flight” as they are given greater freedom to select (better) students and therefore struggle less with a lack of good teachers. On the other hand, public schools have to take all pupils from their catchment area, are underfunded, and struggle with teacher and support staff shortages. They have therefore become the “all Gypsy school,” the repository of “problem students” who are “impossible to teach” (Neumann, 2023). This churchification process further expedited segregation in the Hungarian educational system, which is one of the most selective in Europe (Radó, 2018).

This case study illustrates how involved fatherhood in marginalised Roma communities is shaped by structural constraints and local opportunity structures (cf. Szóke et al., 2024). Adrián’s emotional expressivity, constant presence with his children, willingness to reconfigure his livelihood to spend more time with them, and readiness to make educational sacrifices signify a locally meaningful form of paternal involvement. Thus, Adrián does not embody a fully articulated caring masculinity characteristic of middle-class fathers, but rather an alternative form of caring masculinity in which physical protection, emotional intensity, and pragmatic acts of provision constitute the main modes of fatherly care under conditions of precarity. His case also shows how alternative caring masculinities can combine protective

strength with aspirations for children's futures. As Williams (2009) found among African Caribbean fathers, Adrián redefines responsibility through resilience and presence while also enacting what Dermott (2008) calls *intimate fathering*—emotional communication and moral teaching aimed at securing closeness in constrained settings.

## 5.2. Case Study 2: Kinship and Care Among Working-Class Fathers

For working-class Roma men, fatherhood often centres on breadwinning, kinship solidarity, and balancing the competing demands of work and family. Tomi, a 32-year-old father of six children (aged between 2 months and 14 years) employed at a multinational company in Miskolc, illustrates both the constraints and the caring practices of involved fatherhood under conditions of precarity.

Tomi, whose highest educational level is eighth grade (he only completed primary school), has worked for five years on the Bosch assembly line in Miskolc. He rotates across three shifts and is his family's sole breadwinner. "I'm sure I'm a good father," he told me, adding that "I have been working constantly since I got married. I am for my family." For Tomi, being a good father means steady employment and financial provision. Yet, he is also aware of the contradictions between his workplace demands and domestic expectations:

Since our new baby was born, my wife has quarrelled with me a lot. We fight about me not helping her enough with the children. But when I come home after two 12-hour night shifts, I am exhausted. The night shifts are a bit of a drag.

When his youngest child was born in Spring 2025, Tomi was permitted only two days of paternity leave (although as of January 2025, the legal minimum has increased to 10 days). While he would have preferred to remain at home longer with his wife and child, he accepted the restriction as natural. Nonetheless, he stressed that emotional closeness to his children mattered deeply to him. In his limited free hours, he takes his sons fishing or plays football with them. More often, he takes all six children for a walk through the village, visiting relatives in the nearby Roma colony. As in many Roma households, childrearing is embedded in extended kinship networks: During his wife's recent pregnancy, his siblings, aunt, and mother frequently stepped in to provide food or care, sometimes without being asked.

For Tomi, fatherhood is about "keeping his family"—securing their financial stability and preparing his children for good vocations. He dreams of his sons becoming welders and his daughter a hairdresser, though he admits he cannot support their schooling beyond basic encouragement: "I don't have the brain anymore," he confessed, explaining he does not help with their homework. There are no books at home, so instead, their evenings are spent watching television or YouTube together because, as he says, "this is what the kids enjoy."

Despite these constraints, Tomi's case demonstrates a shift in the perception of caring masculinity, a move towards what Takács (2020) describes as the "domesticity of men." He sometimes assists with childcare or household tasks, particularly when his wife is unwell—though this challenges local gender norms. He told me:

"Are you a pussy? A lackey [*csicska*]?" That's what my mates say when they see me help my wife with housework. They mock me for "suck up" to her. But they're just jealous that I get on well with my wife.

However, he also observed gradual shifts in his social circle's fathering practices: "Nowadays, men also cook when their wives are sick or in the hospital. Or if the wife is working and the man has no job, then the man stays at home with the child and cooks."

Tomi's story illustrates the contradictions of working-class Roma fatherhood, a dilemma between "earning and caring" (Koslowski, 2011). On the one hand, he upholds breadwinning as his main fatherly responsibility and assumes women are the default caregivers, reflecting elements of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Hadas, 2001; Takács, 2020). On the other hand, his reliance on kinship solidarity and his small but meaningful involvement in his children's daily lives point to an emerging caring masculinity. Yet, from his wife's perspective, his caring masculinity remains limited as the burdens of childcare are far from equally shared. As she confided to me:

We have been fighting a lot recently....I cannot control my nerves sometimes; it's just too much on me. There is no time to relax, to get out of the house. I told Tomi the other day that I would go away, leaving him behind with the kids. He was just staring at me, laughing: "Where would you go? To get another man?"

Her frustration highlights how the women in low-income Roma households continue to carry the overwhelming weight of domestic responsibilities, even when the men perceive themselves to be good, involved fathers. This tension reflects Connell's (1995) argument that men in marginalised positions may remain complicit in sustaining gender inequalities. Tomi's caring practices—fishing trips, family walks, and occasional help around the house—are meaningful and emotionally significant, but they coexist with his wife's experience of exhaustion and an unequal burden. His case thus highlights both the gradual reworking of masculinities towards more caring forms and the persistent gendered asymmetries that shape everyday fatherhood under conditions of precarity.

### ***5.3. Case Study 3: Intimacy Through Attachment and the Transmission of Ethnic Identity and Cultural Capital***

Involved fatherhood among FIF Roma graduates is closely tied to educational aspirations, emotional intimacy, attachment parenting, and the transmission of cultural capital. Lali, a teacher and school founder/director from a Boyash Roma background, provides a striking example of how upward mobility can reshape paternal practices while sustaining connections to Roma identity and kinship.

For university-educated Roma fathers in the FIF graduate sample, school choice is a key marker of responsible and caring parenting. Lali was from a poor family that included seven children, raised in a segregated Gypsy colony at a small village's edge, which he then considered as a place of the happiest childhood memories. He was the first in his extended kinship network to achieve a university degree, securing middle-class status. Unlike many upwardly mobile FIF graduates who experience alienation from their origin community (Friedman, 2014; Naudet, 2018; Reay, 2005), Lali preserved strong emotional ties to his extended family, particularly to his mother and sisters, who stayed behind in his village in the southern part of the country. Preserving his emotional connection to his roots eased his transition from a poor lower-class position to a better-off middle-class status, which came with his move to an urban settlement with better educational and labour market opportunities.

He managed to secure the first house of his own in a smaller town in Northern Hungary—where he had moved to work—in his mid-40s, after having adopted one of her sister’s two-year-old sons, Beni, to help her sister in her destitute situation. Lali’s old mother came along with Beni and helped care for him while Lali was working.

Over the past decade, Lali has built a deep emotional bond with Beni. Drawing on his training as a pedagogue, he consciously practised attachment parenting (Sears & Sears, 2001), emphasising sensitivity, responsiveness, and secure bonding. He also nurtured Beni’s ethnic identity in subtle ways. When a classmate, a young boy, once mocked Beni as a “Gypsy,” Beni recounted the incident to Lali, his father, at home: “I do not understand that boy. Isn’t everyone a Gypsy?” In Beni’s world, centred around his father’s Roma-majority secondary school, ethnic identity was not stigmatised but normalised.

Despite a demanding career, Lali consistently invested in Beni’s education—helping with schoolwork, maintaining contact with teachers, and teaching him during the Covid-19 lockdown. For Lali, unlike for Adrián, masculinity and good parenting are less about physical strength than about the accumulation of cultural capital. When I asked him about what kind of masculinity he cultivates in his son’s education, he proudly explained:

Beni will become a boy through going to music school, learning to play the violin, and having swimming lessons. I deliberately show him an opposite model of masculinity than the one I grew up with. He does not need to excel in wrestling or be muscular to become a man.

Lali’s fatherhood blends working-class and middle-class parenting styles: combining the natural growth model and kinship-based solidarity of his lower-class background with what Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation,” characteristic of middle-class parenting. Accordingly, while he deliberately organises Beni’s life through structured after-school activities, he also allows him unstructured time and lets him enjoy the support of their kin in his upbringing. Lali’s case shows how Roma fathers with higher education redefine involved fatherhood in terms of cultural capital, emotional intimacy, kin support, the transmission of ethnic identity, and ethnic pride.

#### ***5.4. Case Study 4: Caring While Living Apart—Involved Fatherhood Among Divorced Roma Graduates***

Divorce and physical separation do not necessarily weaken paternal involvement. Karez, a youth worker with a university degree and a father of three, demonstrates how FIF-graduate Roma fathers can sustain care, intimacy, and educational support for their children even when living apart. Karez was born and raised in a village called Láb, in a Gypsy colony in a poor Romungro family of five children. His father had worked in a nearby mine and cultivated a strong work ethic in his children. Unlike Lali, who shares his household with his son (and his mother), Karez lives apart from his children. Yet, as he explained, physical distance did not lessen his sense of care:

Even though I don’t live together with my kids anymore, it was always important for me to support them, to take care of them, to smooth their path....After the divorce, I took care of them even more. I spent much more time with them. I took them with me to all my summer camps.

Through these camps, which he organised as the leader of a charitable foundation that he established to support disadvantaged Roma youth, his children gained experiences that shaped their own career choices. Many children of FIF graduates, like Karesz's, later pursue social work, teaching, or other helping professions, inspired by their parents' engagement.

Karesz described his approach as a balance between natural growth and concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003). He emphasised supporting his children's individual abilities rather than imposing strict ambitions: "I never forced my kids to become social workers or brain surgeons. I had to assess their abilities and support each one individually." He even accepted when his oldest daughter left university to become a childminder—though he is hopeful she will resume her course in the future.

From his narratives, it is clear that he values his children's emotional well-being above their academic excellence (cf. Szőke, 2022; Szőke et al., 2024). For him, as a father, what is of the utmost significance is the cultivation of the natural capabilities and dispositions of his children:

My oldest daughter started primary school here in my home village, Láb [in the segregated Gypsy school], but from the fifth grade [the equivalent to the beginning of the lower secondary school in the UK], she went to the Gymnasium in the nearby town, Bordó [a selective church school, being one of the most elite, academically high quality secondary schools in the region, having lower and upper-level secondary and A-level classes]. She completed her A levels there with good results and went on to further study. My other two, younger children, Nori and Karcsika, started at an academically strong church school [primary school] in Bordó but finished at Láb, in the segregated school. I had to realise that they couldn't cope with the higher standard of the academically selective church school, and that they should come to Láb. And here they fought their way through. In the eighth grade [at the end of the primary school, the equivalent to the end of the lower secondary school in the UK], even here, I begged my son's teachers to fail him, so that he would come to his senses, because he didn't know anything. Back in lower school, the class teacher always said that he should have been sent back to kindergarten for a year because he was not ready for school, and this was evident throughout school....But my younger daughter is doing really well here in the segregated primary school in Láb; the teachers praise her; she is flourishing.

Karesz's commitment to his children's education was particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when online schooling presented challenges for many families. His son, Karcsika, a "late-developer" as he called him, studying welding at a vocational school, was disengaged and reluctant to complete assignments. Karesz recalled:

He didn't care; he slept through the morning classes, so I got up at dawn, logged onto the platform, and sent in his homework myself. That's when he started getting Bs and As...and that's when I learned welding....And I went to a parents' evening, and his teacher complimented me on my skills...because he knew how lazy Karcsika was...so he graduated from this school... and now he works as a welder and earns good money.

While half-joking, his reflection shows the extent of his involvement: Rather than letting his son fail, he stepped in to secure his son's educational trajectory, even if it meant doing the tasks himself. This episode illustrates

how involved fatherhood may blur the boundary between guidance and substitution, reflecting both deep care and the structural challenges facing disadvantaged Roma youth in education.

Karesz drew some inspiration from his own father. He recalls that he has a very positive father figure, a hard-working man who always provided what his family needed: “We were never hungry, never cold....He was a very enduring, strong man,” he remembered. However, it is possible to recognise a generational difference in fatherly care norms and practices in his narrative (cf. Takács, 2020). Karesz rejects the purely material definitions of fatherhood, the sole importance of the breadwinner role. Instead, in his relationship with his children, he has cultivated intimacy, flexibility, and emotional presence, even when living apart. His case shows how involved fatherhood can take shape through emotional support, institutional navigation, and resilience, even in non-residential arrangements.

## 6. Discussion: Four Models of Roma Involved Fatherhood

A comparative pattern emerges across these four case studies: Among the study participants, Roma fatherhood is deeply classed yet rooted in care and responsibility. For working-class men in marginalised communities (cases 1 and 2), involved fatherhood is expressed through alternative forms of caring masculinities: protective strength, breadwinning, expressive emotions, unconditional giving (cf. Kovai, 2017), and a reliance on kinship solidarity. These practices, while often shaped by constraint, should not be considered deficient but are contextually grounded strategies of care that sustain families in the face of exclusion and precarity.

In contrast, the FIF graduate Roma fathers (cases 3 and 4) enact involved fatherhood through intimacy, cultural capital, and reflexive parenting. Their practices are oriented towards enhancing education, attachment, and emotional well-being, while also maintaining a sense of Roma identity and kinship obligations. Lali’s case shows how cultural resources and professional expertise are mobilised for his son’s development, while Karesz’s demonstrates that even non-residential fathers can remain actively involved through emotional support, educational guidance, and presence.

Together, the four cases illustrate how Roma men negotiate fatherhood at the intersections of class, racialisation, and kinship. They highlight that involved fatherhood is not a single model benchmarked against middle-class ideals but is a set of diverse, meaningful practices—ranging from physical strength and protection to emotional intimacy and education—with each adapted to the local structural conditions and cultural resources available.

Importantly, the contrast between working-class and FIF-graduate fathers should not be understood as two opposites but as points along a continuum of involved fatherhood. Both groups share a deep concern for their children’s well-being, although the resources they can mobilise differ: Working-class fathers rely more on kinship solidarity, immediate provision, and protective physical strength, while FIF graduates draw more on education, cultural capital, and professional expertise. These differences show how resources, mobility trajectories, and racialisation shape care, but they also underscore a common thread: Roma fathers across class positions are invested in caring masculinities and involved fatherhood against their structural racialised precarity.

## 7. Conclusion

Drawing on my ethnographic case studies, I argue that concepts such as “involved fatherhood” and “caring masculinity” often implicitly or explicitly rely on middle-class caring norms, such as intimate, intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. These models risk universalising a narrow cultural ideal of fatherhood. The presented cases complicate this framework by showing that among economically marginalised and racialised Roma men, care and involvement take different forms. Rather than being defined by structured educational investments, helping the children with schoolwork, or constant emotional availability, caring can be expressed through protective physical strength, unconditional giving, kinship-based solidarity, and pragmatic support under conditions of structural scarcity. Thus, these Roma cases demonstrate that caring masculinities are not fixed categories but are contextually produced practices shaped by economic precarity, racialisation, and kinship obligations. Therefore, I argue for a more culturally and structurally grounded understanding of fatherhood that moves beyond middle-class benchmarks.

The four case studies show that Roma fatherhood in Hungary is neither absent nor deficient but is diverse, relational, and deeply class-stratified. The comparison between working-class Roma fathers and FIF graduate Roma fathers should not be interpreted as a dichotomy between “traditional” and “modern” fatherhood. Instead, there is a continuum of involved fatherhood shaped by access to resources, labour market positions, educational experiences, and the degree of racialised precarity. While the working-class fathers draw primarily on kinship solidarity, protective masculinity, and expressive emotionality, the FIF graduates mobilise cultural capital, institutional knowledge, and reflexive parenting repertoires. Yet, both groups express care, responsibility, and aspirations for their children’s futures, even if through different practices and vocabularies. Recognising this continuum helps to avoid pathologising low-income fathers and instead highlights how structural conditions mediate rather than determine the forms that caring masculinity takes.

This comparative lens contributes to three strands of scholarship. First, it broadens our understanding of involved fatherhood by situating it beyond mainstream, middle-class populations and foregrounding the everyday negotiations of racialised minority men. Second, it advances debates on caring masculinities, showing how men enact care under constraints while still, at times, sharing in the gendered division of labour. Third, it engages with scholarship on minority mobility and identity, showing how Roma graduates reconcile working-class and middle-class parenting ideals with kinship obligations and the transmission of Roma identity. Ultimately, the analysis emphasises that Roma fathers—whether in marginalised villages or among the new Roma middle class in small urban towns—actively negotiate fatherhood in ways that challenge deficit narratives and enrich international debates on masculinities, care, and minority parenting.

Simultaneously, women’s perspectives, such as those expressed by Tomi’s wife, highlight that fathers’ increasing involvement in their children’s lives—that is, “being there,” “spending time with them,” or emotionally caring for their well-being—does not necessarily translate into an equal redistribution of domestic labour. The persistent gendered inequalities in households underscore that caring masculinities develop in, rather than outside, broader gender regimes, echoing Connell’s (1995) insight that marginalised men may also remain complicit in reproducing the traditional “gender order” or gendered labour divisions.

This article, therefore, argues that Roma fatherhood in post-socialist Hungary is diverse and class-stratified, yet is consistently rooted in care and responsibility and is always intertwined with the gendered dynamics of household labour and survival under racialised precarity.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The interview data used in the two research projects are not publicly available due to GDPR and ethical restrictions of the projects to protect participants' confidentiality.

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