

Involved Fatherhood Ideals and Practices in European Post-Socialist Societies

Judit Takács¹, Hana Hašková², Alenka Švab³, and Ivett Szalma^{1,4}

¹ Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

² Gender and Sociology Department, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

³ Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

⁴ Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

Correspondence: Judit Takács (takacs.judit@tk.hu)

Submitted: 19 February 2026 **Published:** 24 March 2026

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Involved Fatherhood in European Post-Socialist Societies” edited by Hana Hašková (Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences), Alenka Švab (University of Ljubljana), Ivett Szalma (ELTE Centre for Social Sciences / Corvinus University of Budapest), and Judit Takács (ELTE Centre for Social Sciences), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i532>

Abstract

This thematic issue examines how involved fatherhood is negotiated across post-socialist Europe, where expectations of paternal engagement remain unevenly institutionalised and practiced. Bringing together seventeen contributions covering eleven post-socialist countries and a 16-country comparison, the issue analyses how fathers navigate tensions between traditional breadwinner norms and emerging caregiving ideals. The articles reveal substantial cross-national and social variation shaped by welfare regimes, labour market structures, family policies, and socio-economic inequalities. Using frameworks such as involved fatherhood, caring masculinities, intensive parenting, intersectionality, structural approaches, and the multiple equilibrium approach to fertility, the collection highlights a persistent gap between aspirations and practices. Despite support for involved fatherhood, structural constraints—long working hours, income disparities, workplace cultures, and limited policy support—constrain equal responsibility, particularly for the mental and organisational dimensions of care. Based on diverse qualitative and quantitative data, the findings show class-, education-, ethnicity-, and family-structure based inequalities, demonstrating how institutional legacies, contemporary politics, and socio-economic stratification shape fatherhood in distinct ways, informing more context-sensitive research and policy aimed at advancing gender equality.

Keywords

child care; caring masculinities; European post-socialist societies; gender equality; involved fatherhood; parental leave policies; socio-economic inequalities; work–life balance

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the landscape of fatherhood in Europe has undergone significant transformations. Fathers across the continent have increasingly embraced nurturing roles, becoming more emotionally and practically involved in their children's lives. Yet this "fatherhood revolution," which began in earnest when Norway introduced the father's quota in 1993, has advanced unevenly in Europe. While several Western and Northern European countries have adopted policies that actively encourage paternal involvement, most post-socialist countries have been slower to follow this trajectory, despite well-documented positive influences of involved fatherhood on children's well-being, maternal employment, and fertility rates (Fanelli & Profeta, 2021; Gauthier & Bartova, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

This thematic issue addresses this gap by examining involved fatherhood-related practices, narratives, attitudes, and discourses in European post-socialist societies. The seventeen articles, covering eleven individual countries (Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and a 16-country comparison, offer rich empirical insights into how fathers in this region navigate the tensions between traditional breadwinning expectations and emerging ideals of involved fatherhood. Together, they highlight the complex interplay of individual choices, cultural norms, workplace cultures, family policies, and socio-economic conditions that shape paternal involvement in the examined societies.

The collection demonstrates that post-socialist societies cannot be treated as a monolithic category. The articles reveal considerable regional variation in how fatherhood is understood, practised, and supported in the region. Instead of framing post-socialist involved fatherhood practices as lagging behind developments in Western and Northern Europe, the contributions highlight how these are shaped by specific institutional legacies, demographic and socio-cultural contexts. In the examined societies, fathers encounter distinct policy frameworks, labour market conditions, and cultural expectations. Some countries have introduced progressive parental leave reforms that set aside specific benefits for fathers. Others maintain policies and workplace cultures that continue to reinforce the male breadwinner model, leaving little institutional support for paternal caregiving.

2. Examining Involved Fatherhood

The articles draw on key theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary fatherhood. The concept of involved fatherhood—encompassing engagement, accessibility, and responsibility—serves as a central analytical lens, while also revealing its limits when engagement does not translate into equal responsibility. Several articles further apply theories of caring masculinities to show how fathers negotiate traditional masculine identities with nurturing roles, enacting care through diverse repertoires that do not necessarily conform to middle-class norms. The stereotype content model is employed to analyse public perceptions of single fathers and mothers, revealing the persistence of gendered competence attributions (Herke, 2026). Intensive parenting norms, originally theorised in relation to motherhood, are suggested to operate in distinctly gendered ways, with fathers' selective participation reinforcing rather than challenging maternal responsibility (Klímová Chaloupková & Hašková, 2026; Dohotariu et al., 2026). The multiple equilibrium framework for understanding fertility is only partially supported by Ishchanova's (2026) analysis, which finds that fathers' participation in childcare is positively associated with fathers' fertility intentions, but it is

fathers' involvement in housework that is positively associated with mothers' fertility intentions in Belarus. This underscores the need to consider gender-specific effects and different types of domestic labour when analysing fertility dynamics.

Intersectional and structural perspectives are essential for analysing how class, ethnicity, and institutional contexts shape fathering practices, opportunities, and constraints, challenging universalised notions of involved fatherhood. Together, these contributions conceptualise fatherhood as socially constructed and context-bound, underscoring the need for frameworks that capture diversity, contradiction, and ongoing gender negotiation.

A central theme across the studies is the persistent gap between aspirations and practices. Although fathers in many post-socialist contexts express strong commitments to active involvement, structural constraints—such as long working hours, inflexible employment, income inequalities, and limited policy support—often hinder the realisation of these ideals. At the same time, intensive parenting norms remain gendered, with mothers continuing to carry the primary emotional and logistical burden of childcare, even when fathers participate more than in previous generations.

The articles also reveal important distinctions in how paternal involvement is conceptualised and enacted. Some fathers position themselves primarily as “supportive” partners who assist mothers, protecting the mother-child bond rather than assuming equal parental responsibility. Others, particularly those with higher education and more flexible work arrangements, adopt more egalitarian caregiving practices. Yet, as Dohotariu et al.'s (2026) research of Romanian fathers and Muter's (2026) study of Polish parents also demonstrate, even among those who embrace involved fatherhood, engagement and accessibility do not always translate into taking responsibility for the mental labour and organisational dimensions of childcare. Several contributions examine fathers from marginalised or minority backgrounds, including Roma fathers in Hungary, working-class fathers receiving social services in Czechia, and fathers in precarious employment situations across the region. These studies challenge deficit narratives by documenting how fathers enact meaningful care under economic precarity and social exclusion, even when their approaches diverge from middle-class norms of involved fatherhood.

Social class emerges as a key dimension of differentiation in multiple studies. Durst's (2026) ethnographic study of caring Roma fathers in Hungary reveals how classed resources can shape caring practices: From kinship-based solidarity and physical protection among working-class fathers to the mobilisation of cultural capital and reflexive parenting among graduates. Gřundělová and Mertl (2026) examine Czech fathers receiving social services, demonstrating how insecure housing and precarious labour create systemic constraints that undermine fathers' efforts to put breadwinner ideals into practice. Dančíková's (2026) study in Slovakia shows that fathers with a lower-class background were significantly less likely to use paternal leave. Galántai's (2026) Hungarian register analysis also demonstrates class-differentiated patterns in fathers' uptake of childcare benefits. The study by Kotzeva et al. (2026) similarly shows a growing number of fathers in Bulgaria adopting egalitarian roles, particularly among those with higher education or access to remote work, while ambivalence persists among lower-income and less educated fathers.

Family structure also receives considerable attention, particularly through studies of post-separation fatherhood. Herke (2026) investigates public perceptions of single fathers in Hungary. Ivanova (2026)

examines fathers navigating fragile and informal shared care arrangements after family separation in Russia, where the legal and cultural frameworks position mothers as default custodial parents and marginalise fathers' caregiving roles. Saxonberg and Formanková (2026) analyse Czech men's organisations' positions on post-divorce custody.

Ethnicity, whilst less systematically addressed across the collection, features prominently in Durst's (2026) examination of racialised Roma fatherhood. It is also visible in the study of ethnically diverse Romanian fathers (Dohotariu et al., 2026) and Czech fathers receiving social services (Gřundělová & Mertl, 2026). Thus, the collection can broaden our understanding beyond normative, majority-culture two-parent fatherhood to include diverse masculinities and caring practices, shaped by class, structural positions, family circumstances, and ethnicity.

Institutions and discourse play a central role: Family law, parental leave policies, and workplace regulations shape fathers' opportunities for involvement, while media, men's organisations, and social work practice frame the cultural norms they navigate. Although EU-aligned policy reforms have introduced new paternal leave provisions in several countries, uptake remains limited where these clash with breadwinner expectations, unsupportive workplace cultures, and socio-economic constraints that make fathers' income loss untenable.

Methodologically, the collection presents diverse and innovative approaches to studying fatherhood, illustrating the benefits of triangulating methods and data sources. Qualitative studies employ in-depth interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and narrative analysis to illuminate lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and the performative, constantly shifting nature of fathering. Quantitative approaches utilise survey data, administrative registers, and birth cohort studies. Třísková and Szalma's (2026) analysis of 16-country ISSP data reveals that social expectations regarding the roles of mothers and fathers continue to evolve unevenly, with egalitarian preferences predominating in the Nordic countries, semi-traditional models more prevalent in parts of Central and Southern Europe, and traditional orientations remaining strongest in post-socialist contexts. Ishchanova's (2026) analysis of the Generations and Gender Survey in Belarus examines the influence of fathers' involvement in household tasks on fertility intentions. Makay and Veroszta's (2026) analysis of more than 1,700 Hungarian fathers from the Cohort '18 study shows that long working hours and work-family conflict reduce paternal involvement in childcare, while egalitarian attitudes are associated with greater paternal engagement, particularly on weekends.

Several studies demonstrate the power of mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative elements. Interdisciplinary methods also figure in articles in which a systematic legal review is combined with qualitative content and critical discourse analysis of Croatian media representations, demonstrating how legal and cultural framings intersect (Miloš et al., 2026). Temporal innovation is evident in diachronic designs: For example, Slovenian fatherhood is traced across four qualitative studies spanning fifteen years between 2005 and 2020 by Švab and Humer (2026), and intergenerational transmission is examined by comparing Lithuanian men's childhood experiences with their current fathering practices (Maslauskaitė & Jusienė, 2026).

A diachronic perspective in the collection's articles traces developments over extended periods of time. These longitudinal insights reveal gradual shifts from uninvolved to supportive, and in some cases to more genuinely involved, fatherhood practices. While traditional models of fatherhood have declined—at least in certain social

strata of the examined societies—and fathers now more commonly attend childbirth, use paternal leave, and engage in everyday childcare, practices remain far from gender-equal in most contexts.

The articles also address the political dimensions of fatherhood. In countries such as Hungary and Croatia, conservative governments have actively reinforced traditional gender roles, complicating efforts to promote more egalitarian parenting arrangements. At the same time, some men's organisations have emerged in Czechia and other countries, ostensibly to advocate for fathers' rights. However, closer examination reveals that several of these organisations espouse anti-feminist positions and promote a "pre-modern view of masculinity" in which the family is conceptualised as the father's property (Saxonberg & Formanková, 2026, p. 1). These political currents shape the discursive and policy environment where individual fathers make choices about their involvement.

The presented studies deepen our understanding of how involved fatherhood is negotiated where structural support for gender equality is limited, maternal caregiving remains normative, and economic conditions prioritise breadwinning. Although caring masculinities are emerging—especially among higher-educated, middle-class fathers with flexible employment—equitable parenting remains constrained by workplace cultures, income inequalities, gender pay gaps, policy frameworks, and broader gendered norms about appropriate parental behaviour.

3. Contributions to Social Science Fields and Policy Implications

The collection contributes significantly to several social scientific fields. In family sociology, it shows how family practices and gender relations are renegotiated in post-socialist contexts, where the "stalled revolution" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) in gender equality takes specific forms within families, shaped by regional histories, institutional legacies, and contemporary political economies. By emphasising the relational nature of parenting, it also demonstrates that fathers' involvement is co-constructed with mothers' practices and attitudes rather than being an individual attribute.

For gender studies and masculinities research, the collection shows how caring masculinities emerge yet remain constrained where hegemonic masculinity is tied to breadwinning, and how class- and ethnicity-specific fathering can challenge middle-class norms as universal standards.

For demography and population studies, the findings on how different types of paternal involvement relate differently to mothers' and fathers' fertility intentions advance fertility theory beyond simple linear models, also providing empirical background for policy discussions about how to address low fertility in the region.

For European studies, it provides empirical insights on evolving gender relations, family life, and welfare regimes in a region often underrepresented internationally, enabling comparisons with Western and Northern Europe while highlighting regional specificities.

For social work and social policy, studies of marginalised fathers—those engaged with social services, in precarious employment, or from minority ethnic backgrounds—support more inclusive policies and services that recognise fathers' caring capabilities rather than reinforcing deficit narratives.

For policy studies and comparative welfare state research, the collection demonstrates how policy implementation and effectiveness depend on interactions between formal policy provisions, workplace cultures, economic structures, and cultural norms, with differing uptake of measures such as paternal leave underscoring institutional complementarities and path dependencies.

The collection highlights key policy implications. First, parental leave policies are necessary but insufficient to foster involved fatherhood: Even well-designed, adequately paid, sufficiently long, and non-transferable leave depends on supportive institutional and cultural contexts. Promoting paternal involvement, therefore, requires complementary measures addressing workplace cultures, including anti-discrimination initiatives, employer incentives for work–life balance, and public campaigns challenging the stigmatisation of caregiving men.

Second, addressing the gender pay gap and income inequalities is crucial, as these often make fathers' leave-taking economically unviable; progressive taxation systems, universal childcare provision, and policies that support mothers' continuous labour force participation can reduce the economic penalties associated with fathers' caregiving.

Third, family policies must accommodate diverse family forms, avoiding middle-class, majority-culture biases that disadvantage single, non-resident, or precariously employed fathers as well as fathers belonging to social minorities, including ethnic minority, migrant, and gay fathers.

Fourth, custody and parental rights frameworks in many post-socialist contexts require reform to move beyond maternal presumptions, acknowledging fathers' caregiving capabilities and children's rights to both parents.

Fifth, the recognition that media and public discourse shape norms of fatherhood calls for efforts to promote inclusive, egalitarian representations and challenge deficit narratives.

Overall, advancing involved fatherhood requires coherent policies across labour market regulations, taxation, parental leaves and childcare provisions, education, and anti-discrimination measures alongside sustained political commitment to gender equality, especially where conservative forces may resist such agendas.

4. Conclusion

The findings show that fatherhood transformation in post-socialist Europe is an ongoing, uneven, and contested process that requires multi-level analysis—from individual attitudes and couple dynamics to workplace practices, policies, cultural norms, and political discourses—alongside methodological and conceptual nuance, attentive to contemporary contradictions.

We can also identify promising directions for future research. Comparative studies that situate post-socialist societies within the broader European context remain valuable for illuminating regional specificities and commonalities. Longitudinal research tracking individual fathers over time could further clarify how involvement evolves across the life course and in response to policy changes. Greater attention to non-resident fathers and those belonging to social minorities would deepen our understanding of diversity within fatherhood. Exploration of the intersections between fatherhood and other dimensions of identity and social location, including precarity, disability, migration status, and urban-rural divides, would further

advance the field. Future research should also remain attentive to the broader political, policy, and demographic contexts shaping fatherhood in different parts of post-socialist Europe. Where family policies are tied to demographic concerns and traditional family arrangements, increased paternal involvement does not automatically lead to more egalitarian gender relations, but may unfold within existing gendered structures. It is our hope that this collection will encourage further research, inform policy debates, and contribute to broader conversations about gender equality, parenting, and social inclusion in post-socialist Europe and beyond.

Funding

Academic editors Ivett Szalma and Judit Takács gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Lendület “Momentum” Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences under Grant LENDULET_2021-78. Hana Hašková acknowledges the financial support from the Czech Science Foundation under grant no. 26–21466S, “Selective and Inclusive Trends in Childcare Policies and Their Impacts on Work-Care Practices in Czechia in Comparative Perspective,” and from the institutional support RVO: 68378025. Alenka Švab acknowledges the financial support from Research Core Funding No. P5-0183, “Social Psychology and Sociology of Everyday Life” (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana), by the Slovenian Research Agency (2022–2027). Publication of this editorial in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Dančíková, Z. (2026). Involved fatherhood in Slovakia? A multi-dimensional picture painted using multiple methods. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10960. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10960>
- Dohotariu, A., Geambașu, R., & Raț, C. (2026). Between supportive and equal parenting: Exploring middle-class fathering in Romania today. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10874. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10874>
- Durst, J. (2026). Involved fatherhood among Roma men: Class, kinship, and caring masculinities in post-socialist Hungary. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 11201. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11201>
- Fanelli, E., & Profeta, P. (2021). Fathers' involvement in the family, fertility, and maternal employment: Evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. *Demography*, 58(5), 1931–1954. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9446578>
- Galántai, J. (2026). Developments in involved fatherhood in Hungary: A register database analysis. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10898. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10898>
- Gauthier, A. H., & Bartova, A. (2018). The impact of leave policies on employment, fertility, gender equality, and health. In K. M. Shockley, W. Shen, & R. C. Johnson (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of the global work–family interface* (pp. 120–138). Cambridge University Press.
- Gründelová, B., & Mertl, J. (2026). Becoming a “good” father in the context of Czech social work. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10878. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10878>
- Herke, B. (2026). Warm fathers and competent mothers? Stereotypes and attitudes towards single parents in Hungary. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10919. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10919>
- Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. Viking.
- Ishchanova, K. (2026). Housework, childcare, and fertility intentions: The role of fathers' involvement in Belarus. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10865. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10865>

- Ivanova, E. (2026). "This kind of thing does not really exist in Russia": Russian fathers negotiating shared care arrangements. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10983. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10983>
- Klímová Chaloupková, J., & Hašková, H. (2026). Involved fathers and intensive parenting in Czechia: Norms and fathers' contextualised practices. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10861. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10861>
- Kotzeva, T., Dimitrova, E., & Ilieva, K. (2026). Changing fatherhood: Social differences in parental leave uptake and childcare participation among Bulgarian men. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10845. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10845>
- Lamb, M. E. (Ed.). (2010). *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed.). Wiley.
- Makay, Z., & Veroszta, Z. (2026). More helpers than sharers? Barriers to involved fathering in Hungary. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10884. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10884>
- Maslauskaitė, A., & Jusienė, R. (2026). The intergenerational transmission of parenting among Lithuanian men. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10903. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10903>
- Miloš, B., Tutić Grokša, I., & Čekolj, N. (2026). Framing fatherhood: Legal norms and media narratives in Croatia. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10886. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10886>
- Muter, M. (2026). New generation of fathers in Poland: A path to gender equality? *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10887. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10887>
- Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica*, 97(2), 153–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1651-2227.2007.00572.x>
- Saxonberg, S., & Formanková, L. (2026). Involved fatherhood as interpreted by Czech men's organizations. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 11105. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11105>
- Švab, A., & Humer, Ž. (2026). Between supportive and involved fatherhood in Slovenia. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 10859. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10859>
- Třísková, H., & Szalma, I. (2026). Attitudes towards work: The care arrangements of couples with preschool-aged children—a European comparison. *Social Inclusion*, 14, Article 11016. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11016>

About the Authors



Judit Takács is a research professor at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences. Her main research interests cover family sociology, homophobia, and genderphobia. Her recent publications include co-authored articles in *Big Data & Society*, the *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, and *Political Research Exchange*.



Hana Hašková is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. She studies gender, family, and reproduction. Her recent publications address intensive parenthood and precarious work among caregivers, appearing in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education, Community, Work & Family*, and the *Journal of Family Studies*.



Alenka Švab is a professor of sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on various topics from studies of family and family policy, everyday life, life course, gender, sexuality and intimacy.



Ivett Szalma is a research professor at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, where she leads the “Momentum” Reproductive Sociology Research Group. She is also an associate professor at Corvinus University of Budapest. Her research focuses on issues related to childlessness, attitudes towards same-sex couples and assisted reproduction.