

cogitatio

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Involved Fatherhood in European Post-Socialist Societies

Volume 14

2026

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2803

Edited by Hana Hašková, Alenka Švab, Ivett Szalma, and Judit Takács

Social Inclusion, 2026, Volume 14
Involved Fatherhood in European Post-Socialist Societies

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070–129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
http://www.typografia.pt/en/

Cover image: © Toa Heftiba

Academic Editors
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)
Judit Takács (ELTE Centre for Social Sciences)

Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion

This issue is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY). Articles may be reproduced provided that credit is given to the original and *Social Inclusion* is acknowledged as the original venue of publication.

Table of Contents

Involved Fatherhood Ideals and Practices in European Post-Socialist Societies
Judit Takács, Hana Hašková, Alenka Švab, and Ivett Szalma

Attitudes Towards Work: The Care Arrangements of Couples With Preschool-Aged Children—A European Comparison
Hana Třísková and Ivett Szalma

Between Supportive and Involved Fatherhood in Slovenia
Alenka Švab and Živa Humer

The Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting Among Lithuanian Men
Aušra Maslauskaitė and Roma Jusienė

More Helpers Than Sharers? Barriers to Involved Fathering in Hungary
Zsuzsanna Makay and Zsuzsanna Veroszta

Developments in Involved Fatherhood in Hungary: A Register Database Analysis
Júlia Galántai

Changing Fatherhood: Social Differences in Parental Leave Uptake and Childcare Participation Among Bulgarian Men
Tatyana Kotzeva, Elitsa Dimitrova, and Kalina Ilieva

Involved Fatherhood in Slovakia? A Multi-Dimensional Picture Painted Using Multiple Methods
Zuzana Dančíková

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

Becoming a "Good" Father in the Context of Czech Social Work
Barbora Gřundělová and Jiří Mertl

Between Supportive and Equal Parenting: Exploring Middle-Class Fathering in Romania Today
Anca Dohotariu, Réka Geambașu, and Cristina Rat

Involved Fathers and Intensive Parenting in Czechia: Norms and Fathers' Contextualised Practices
Jana Klímová Chaloupková and Hana Hašková

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

Table of Contents

Warm Fathers and Competent Mothers? Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Single Parents in Hungary
Boglárka Herke

"This Kind of Thing Does Not Really Exist in Russia": Russian Fathers Negotiating Shared Care Arrangements
Ekaterina Ivanova

Framing Fatherhood: Legal Norms and Media Narratives in Croatia
Brigita Miloš, Ivana Tutić Grokša, and Nadja Čekolj

Involved Fatherhood as Interpreted by Czech Men's Organizations
Steven Saxonberg and Lenka Formanková

Housework, Childcare, and Fertility Intentions: The Role of Fathers' Involvement in Belarus
Kamila Ishchanova

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12229
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.12229

cogitatio

EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

Involved Fatherhood Ideals and Practices in European Post-Socialist Societies

Judit Takács [1], Hana Hašková [2], Alenka Švab [3], 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

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

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., & Rat, 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.108798

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.

Gřundělová, 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.108867

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.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11016
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11016

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Attitudes Towards Work: The Care Arrangements of Couples With Preschool-Aged Children—A European Comparison

Hana Třísková [1] and **Ivett Szalma** [2,3]

[1] Charles University, Czech Republic
[2] Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary
[3] Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

Correspondence: Ivett Szalma (szalma.ivett@tk.hu)

Submitted: 25 July 2025 **Accepted:** 3 December 2025 **Published:** 4 February 2026

Issue: This article 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

Societal expectations in Europe regarding the roles of mothers and fathers in the work and caregiving spheres continue to evolve unevenly. While the labour market participation of women has become widespread, shifts in terms of normative support for paternal caregiving have progressed more slowly, which reflects a persistent cultural lag in the gender revolution process. This study examines public attitudes towards work–care arrangements and preferences for organising work and childcare for preschool-aged children employing data from the 2022 International Social Survey Programme conducted across 16 European countries. Applying multinomial logistic regression models, the analysis compares support for three ideal-typical arrangements—traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian—across a range of sociodemographic, attitudinal, and contextual dimensions. The findings reveal pronounced regional patterns: Egalitarian preferences dominate in Nordic countries, semi-traditional models are more prevalent in parts of Central and Southern Europe, and traditional orientations remain dominant in post-socialist contexts. Gender ideology, religiosity, and education comprise the central predictors of support for egalitarian arrangements, while attitudes towards the distribution of paid parental leave further differentiate national profiles. Overall, the results demonstrate that public preferences are shaped by the interplay of cultural norms and institutional conditions, which underscores the tension between advancing structural change and enduring normative expectations that surround parental roles in Europe.

Keywords

Europe; fatherhood; gendered division of labour; normative attitudes; work–care arrangements

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

The division of work and caregiving responsibilities with regard to couples with children forms a crucial aspect of family life that is intricately connected to broader social, economic, and cultural frameworks (Craig & van Tienoven, 2021; Cunha & Atalaia, 2019). This issue is of particular importance in Europe, where diverse historical paths, cultural norms, and policy environments lead to significant variations in how couples perceive and manage the balance between employment and caregiving duties (Cunha & Atalaia, 2019; Lomazzi et al., 2019). Forming an understanding of these attitudes is vital in terms of revealing how families perceive the appropriate division of paid work and caregiving, and how these perceptions reflect broader gender norms and institutional constraints (Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024; Lomazzi et al., 2019).

Parental attitudes towards work and care arrangements in Europe reflect a range of approaches shaped by both individual preferences and structural constraints (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Lomazzi et al., 2019). Rather than forming in isolation, these attitudes are embedded within societal expectations regarding the gendered division of labour, the availability and design of parental leave schemes, and access to formal childcare services (Javornik & Kurowska, 2017; Mauerer, 2023). In certain contexts, traditional norms continue to emphasise the primary caregiving role of mothers, thus reinforcing gendered labour market engagement and domestic responsibility patterns. Conversely, other European countries have experienced a marked shift towards more egalitarian models, concerning which caregiving and professional work are more evenly distributed between the partners and are supported by progressive policy measures and evolving cultural attitudes (Cunha & Atalaia, 2019; Meil, 2013).

The aim of this article is to conduct a cross-national comparative analysis of the patterns and determinants of the care arrangements of European couples with preschool-aged children. It focuses primarily on the dynamic interplay between individual attitudes, societal norms, and institutional frameworks, and examines the extent to which these factors collectively shape family decision-making processes. By investigating these dimensions, the study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms via which couples adapt to changing economic conditions, policy reforms, and shifting cultural expectations, and offers insights into the diversity of work–family balance strategies across the continent.

Furthermore, the research considers the implications of these care arrangements for gender equality, particularly in terms of how parents share paid work and caregiving responsibilities. It considers how policy environments have the potential to either perpetuate traditional gender disparities or facilitate the more equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities, thereby influencing both parental well-being and early childhood experiences. Building upon these considerations, the study aims to provide a comprehensive comparative assessment of public preferences regarding parental work–care arrangements across 16 European countries. In specific terms, it examines how individuals evaluate traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian models of the organisation of paid work and early childcare, and how these preferences are shaped by socio-demographic characteristics, gender ideology, and attitudes towards parental leave. Via the integration of descriptive analyses, hierarchical cluster techniques, and multinomial regression models, the study seeks to uncover both the individual-level determinants and the broader normative configurations that structure cross-country variations. Applying this approach, the article advances the understanding of the cultural and institutional conditions under which more egalitarian work–care ideals emerge—or persistently fail to take hold—in contemporary Europe.

Ultimately, the study contributes to forming a nuanced understanding of the complex socio-institutional landscape that underpins work–care negotiations by providing evidence-based recommendations for crafting policies that support sustainable and inclusive family practices in diverse European settings. The structure of this article is as follows: The following section presents a theoretical discussion grounded in key concepts such as the gender revolution, evolving gender roles, changing notions of fatherhood, and family policies directed at fathers. This theoretical framework positions attitudes towards parental work–care organisation as a normative indicator of the cultural and institutional climate for fatherhood. Section 3 introduces the data and methods used in the empirical analysis, while Section 4 presents the results based on descriptive statistics, regression models and cluster analysis. This is followed by a discussion that situates the findings within the broader socio-political landscape.

2. Theoretical Concepts

2.1. Linking Attitudes, Institutions, and Practices

In order to comprehend paternal involvement in childcare, it is essential to explore the interaction between individual attitudes and the broader institutional and behavioural contexts. Previous research has highlighted the interdependence of these three dimensions—attitudes, institutions, and behaviours—while acknowledging their distinct analytical roles (Lütolf & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2023; Omidakhsh et al., 2020). Institutions define forms of work–care division that are both practically feasible and socially legitimate; attitudes reflect the normative evaluation of these arrangements; and behaviours represent their everyday enactment. From this perspective, attitudes towards parental work–care organisation capture the normative layer of gender relations that mediate between institutional opportunity structures and actual caregiving practices (Edlund & Öun, 2016; Schindler et al., 2025).

Institutions significantly influence societal attitudes in terms of both the feasibility and legitimacy of paternal caregiving. When national policies provide individual, well-compensated, and non-transferable parental leave for men, they not only allocate time for caregiving but also signal that paternal involvement is socially esteemed (Dearing, 2016; Haas & Hwang, 2008). Over time, such policies engender a process of policy feedback, wherein exposure to institutional support alters public expectations concerning the roles of men and women. Conversely, when leave entitlement is brief, insufficiently compensated, or transferable, caregiving continues to be predominantly perceived as maternal work, thereby reinforcing traditional norms (Meil, 2013; Schindler et al., 2025). Thus, policies serve as both material incentives and normative signals that shape collective beliefs concerning gendered caregiving responsibilities.

While institutions delineate potential opportunities, attitudes represent the extent to which individuals internalise or challenge these opportunities. They constitute a component of the cultural framework that either facilitates or restricts behavioural change (Omidakhsh et al., 2020; Schindler et al., 2025). Attitudinal support for paternal involvement establishes the normative foundation upon which policy measures can be developed. In the absence of such support, even substantial leave entitlements or flexible working rights may remain underutilised. Conversely, behavioural changes—such as an increase in the take-up of paternal leave—potentially influence attitudes via exposure effects since visible examples of engaged fatherhood serve to normalise new caregiving patterns (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Kaufman, 2018).

Overall, this indicates that the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is reciprocal, with norms both preceding and following practice. The dynamics in question are evident within historically specific welfare and gender regimes. Nordic welfare contexts often illustrate how supportive policies and egalitarian norms act to reinforce each other, which leads to the widespread acceptance of shared caregiving responsibilities. In contrast, Western Europe, where modified breadwinner models persist, displays more ambivalent attitudes that reflect the coexistence of traditional and egalitarian ideals (Pascall & Lewis, 2004). In many post-socialist and Southern European contexts, shaped by legacies of state-socialist employment or strong familialism, normative change tends to occur more slowly despite the introduction of formal policy reforms (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). This cross-national variation suggests that the alignment between institutional frameworks and attitudinal models is historically contingent rather than uniform.

2.2. Changing Gender Roles and the Involvement of Fathers

Gender roles, as defined as socially constructed expectations concerning the appropriate behaviour and responsibilities of men and women, have traditionally shaped the distribution of work and care within families (Lomazzi et al., 2019). Conventional gender role attitudes assign domestic and caregiving tasks primarily to women, while men are expected to serve as the main breadwinners (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). In contrast, egalitarian gender role attitudes promote the equal sharing of both paid work and unpaid care, thus challenging the established division of labour (Salin et al., 2018). Although such attitudes exert a strong influence on the decisions couples make with regard to work–care arrangements, practical constraints—such as workplace norms, wage disparities, and the limited availability of childcare—potentially restrict the realisation of egalitarian preferences (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Haas & Hwang, 2008).

The evolution of gender role attitudes across European societies reflects broader cultural, generational, and institutional shifts (Knight & Brinton, 2017). At the individual level, education and personal experience often foster more egalitarian outlooks (Boehnke, 2011; Du et al., 2021). At the societal level, entrenched cultural norms, policy environments, and welfare-state configurations contribute to the way in which gender roles are perceived and enacted (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Younger generations tend to express more egalitarian views than older cohorts, thus indicating a gradual shift towards more equal expectations of the roles of men and women in the family context (Boehnke, 2011). Cross-national research has revealed considerable variation: Northern and Western European countries generally exhibit more egalitarian norms and greater institutional support for gender equality, whereas traditional attitudes remain more prevalent in the Southern and Eastern European contexts (Cascella et al., 2024; Salin et al., 2018).

These cultural and institutional environments shape attitudes towards parental work–care organisation (Pavolini et al., 2025; Stickney & Konrad, 2012). Moreover, such attitudes reflect both beliefs concerning the extent to which responsibilities should be shared and perceptions of what is feasible within a given societal context (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Li et al., 2021; Salin et al., 2018). When paternal caregiving is socially accepted, the perceived social costs of men taking leave or reducing their working hours decline, which facilitates behavioural change and renders shared parenting more realistic (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Rehel, 2014). In contrast, in societies in which traditional norms remain strong, the active participation of men in childcare continues to be viewed as less legitimate or practical, thus leading many couples to adopt more conventional arrangements despite shifting ideals (Burnett et al., 2013; Karu & Kasearu, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the involvement of fathers in childcare has undergone significant transformation (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). Historically conceptualised primarily as economic providers, fathers are increasingly being seen as active caregivers whose daily engagement plays an essential role in their children's well-being (Beglaubter, 2021; Cabrera et al., 2018). Contemporary fathers are more involved than previously in a wide range of tasks, including feeding, bathing, playing, providing emotional support, and participating in educational activities (Deutsch et al., 2001). This shift is supported by cultural changes that emphasise shared parenting, evolving constructions of masculinity, higher levels of female labour force participation, and improvements to policies that recognise and encourage paternal caregiving (Doucet & McKay, 2020; Novianti & Islami, 2023).

The "new father" ideal captures these evolving expectations by emphasising emotional closeness, nurturing behaviour, the sharing of responsibility for childcare, and a stronger commitment to the work–life balance (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Complementing such behavioural approaches, the concept of "intimate fatherhood" emphasises the emotional engagement of fathers and enhanced relational intensity with their children, thus shifting beyond traditional breadwinner-focused identities (Dermott, 2003; Miller & Dermott, 2015).

Despite the growing endorsement of these ideals, empirical evidence indicates that a gap persists between normative expectations and everyday practice. Persistent traditional norms, workplace cultures that prioritise uninterrupted employment, and institutional barriers often limit the capacity of fathers to engage in childcare to the extent they would wish (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). As a result, the involvement of fathers continues to vary significantly across European countries (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). Paternal involvement tends to be higher in Northern and Western European countries, where egalitarian gender role attitudes are widespread and supportive policies—such as paternity leave, parental leave for fathers, and accessible childcare—are well established, than in Southern and Eastern European countries, where persistent traditional norms and weaker policy support result in lower levels of paternal engagement and the more pronounced gendered division of care (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Javornik & Kurowska, 2017).

Overall, the increasing involvement of fathers in childcare forms a central component of ongoing changes in gender roles across Europe. Active fatherhood contributes to more balanced work–care arrangements within couples, enhances family dynamics, and supports the emotional and social development of children. As cultural norms continue to evolve and institutional support expands, the role of fathers is increasingly being recognised as integral to both family well-being and broader societal progress toward gender equality.

2.3. Family Policies and Welfare Regimes

Paid leave, which is designed to enable parents to reconcile paid employment with early-years caregiving while shaping societal expectations concerning gender roles, constitutes one of the core elements of contemporary family-policy regimes (Hsiao, 2023; Thévenon, 2011). Policies regarding paternal leave have gained significant attention as research increasingly highlights the role of fathers in the sharing of child-rearing duties (Duvander et al., 2021; Lütolf, 2025); moreover, as societal norms continue to shift, increasing recognition is evident of the benefits of the active involvement of fathers in terms of both the well-being of their children and gender equality (Baird et al., 2021; Rollè et al., 2019).

Empirical research across multiple national contexts has demonstrated that the institutional design of parental leave policies—specifically the presence of individualised, non-transferable entitlement reserved for fathers, often termed the "father's quota"—constitutes the most consequential policy lever in terms of increasing the uptake of paternal leave and reshaping the gendered division of early childcare (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011). When leave is explicitly earmarked for fathers and structured on a "use-it-or-lose-it" basis, the uptake of leave by fathers increases substantially (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; Lütolf, 2025). The quota removes the need for negotiation with mothers and provides fathers with institutional legitimacy in terms of signalling that they are competent caregivers that deserve protected time with their children (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Lütolf, 2025). This policy design approach challenges deeply embedded cultural norms that historically positioned motherhood as the primary caregiving role and fatherhood as secondary (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020). In contrast, leave systems that allow for flexibility or full transferability between parents tend to perpetuate traditional roles since mothers claim most of the available entitlements while fathers, who lack explicit institutional encouragement, often opt out of taking leave altogether (Dearing, 2016; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011).

Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland—have pioneered the most developed models in this respect (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021), combining substantial, earnings-related, non-transferable father's quotas with robust income replacement (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Ray et al., 2010) and deliberate normative campaigns that aim to promote shared caregiving as a marker of gender equality (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021).

Western European countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom feature more mixed configurations. Although several systems have progressed towards gender-equality objectives, elements of the modified breadwinner model persist, which has resulted in the weakening of incentives for the uptake of paternal leave (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Lewis & Campbell, 2007). In most post-socialist European states, although women participate to a significant extent in the labour market, the design of parental-leave programmes creates a stark mismatch between the duration of entitlement and the generosity of compensation. These countries typically provide very long entitlement periods—often three years or more—but couple them with modest, flat-rate wage replacement rates that render leave financially unattractive for fathers, particularly in the context of persistent gender wage gaps and the higher average earnings of men (Fodor et al., 2002; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). Similarly, the strongly familialist welfare regimes of Southern Europe continue to provide minimal father-specific leave entitlements, with correspondingly low uptake rates (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Tanturri et al., 2020; Ray et al., 2010). Table 1 in the Supplementary File provides an overview of the provision of father-specific leave across Europe in 2022.

It is not possible to form a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and feasibility of father-oriented leave policies without considering labour market structures. The availability of part-time employment and flexible working arrangements plays a crucial role in terms of determining the capacity of parents to share caregiving responsibilities. In 2024, male part-time employment stood at approximately 20% in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, compared to less than 10% in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland; concerning mothers of children under six years of age, however, the rates exceeded 60% and were below 10%, respectively (Eurostat, 2025a). These figures illustrate the significant cross-national differences in labour market structures. These structural differences significantly influence the uptake of leave and the perceived feasibility of gender-equal arrangements (Omidakhsh et al., 2020). Consequently, even

well-designed leave policies do not necessarily lead to behavioural changes if broader labour market conditions continue to position caregiving primarily as a maternal responsibility (see Supplementary File, Table 2; Gehringer & Klasen, 2017).

Attitudinal patterns towards the involvement of fathers are also shaped by the afore-mentioned institutional and structural contexts. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour posits that attitudes constitute merely one aspect of behavioural intentions; perceptions of feasibility and opportunity are equally significant. This helps to explain why egalitarian work–care preferences are more common in Scandinavian countries, where policies and labour market structures act to support feasibility, and less common in post-socialist contexts, where gender-equal arrangements are perceived as less attainable (André et al., 2025; Sjöberg, 2004). Table 2 in the Supplementary File provides a summary of these cross-national labour-market patterns.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Data

This article employs data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles V module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 2022, which provides extensive insights into societal perceptions of gender roles in both the public and private spheres, as well as attitudes towards parenthood, the work–life balance, gender equality, and the division of domestic and childcare responsibilities. In comparison to previous years, the module was expanded so as to encompass multiple enquiries—for example, a battery of questions on specific childcare tasks and their allocation between mothers and fathers. The module provides valuable insights into social norms surrounding family life and gender relations and the extent to which these evolve across both time and cultural contexts. Applying descriptive statistics, we explored individual attitudes to the topic of preferred work–care arrangements in families with a preschool-aged child. The following countries were analysed: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. The descriptive statistics of the variables employed are reported in Table 1. Our final sample consisted of 15,419 respondents, of whom 7,244 were men and 8,175 women.

3.2. Variables

3.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable, the preferred work–care arrangements of couples with a preschool-aged child, captured the normative views of the respondents on how parents should organise paid work and childcare. Based on the ISSP item "Consider a family with a child under school age. What, in your opinion, is the best way for them to organise their family and work life?" the responses were recoded into three categories that reflected the degree of gender specialisations in parental roles. The traditional model referred to arrangements wherein the mother stays at home and the father works full-time. The semi-traditional model covered situations in which the mother works part-time while the father remains in full-time employment, which reflected partial convergence towards the dual-earner model. Finally, the egalitarian model referred to all arrangements in which both parents participate in paid work—either full-time or part-time—or where the father assumes the main caregiving role. While the item refers to how parents should organise paid work

and childcare, we interpreted the responses as a normative indicator of the extent to which caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities are expected to be divided between mothers and fathers, given that paid working hours implicitly signal assumptions about the allocation of childcare, while acknowledging that paid working time is an imperfect proxy for actual caregiving time.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

The independent socio-demographic variables included sex, age, education, employment status, and partnership status. Sex was coded as a binary variable (0 = male, 1 = female), with men serving as the reference category. Age was grouped into six categories (15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65+ years) so as to capture potential generational and life-course differences in gender role attitudes; the youngest group (15–24) was considered to be the reference category. Educational attainment was split into three levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—with primary education considered to be the reference category. Employment status was measured via three categories: in paid work, not in paid work, and retired; the respondents in paid work formed the reference group aimed at assessing differences between the active, non-active, and retired populations. Partnership status was derived from the living in a steady partnership variable and comprised three categories: living with a partner in the same household, having a partner but living separately, and no partner. Respondents with a partner served as the reference group in the regression model aimed at assessing the impact of partnership and cohabitation on gender role preferences.

Religiosity was measured via attendance at religious services, an approach that better reflects active religious practice than formal affiliation. Responses were recoded into three categories: frequent attendance (several times per month or more), occasional attendance (several times per year or once per year), and never. Those who frequently attend religious services served as the reference group aimed at capturing differences in moral and cultural orientations towards gender and family roles. Respondents without any religious affiliation and those who did not report their religious affiliation were excluded from the analysis. Parental status was measured by the number of children and categorised as childless, one child, two children, and three or more children. Childless individuals served as the baseline category, thus allowing for the assessment of how direct parental experience shapes attitudes towards work and care arrangements.

The financial difficulty variable was derived from the survey question: “Thinking about your household’s total income, including all the sources of income of all the members who contribute to it, how difficult or easy is it currently for your household to make ends meet?” The responses were recoded into three categories that reflected the perceived financial situation of the respondents: financially strained (difficulty making ends meet), neutral (neither easy nor difficult), and financially comfortable (little to no difficulty). This variable captured the subjective economic well-being of households, complemented the objective socio-demographic indicators, and allowed for the assessment of the extent to which economic security shapes work–care arrangement preferences.

The preferred division of paid parental leave variable was based on the survey item that explicitly referred to a “hypothetical couple” described in the preceding question—namely, a couple in which both partners work full-time and have a newborn child. The item asked: “Still thinking about the same couple, if both are in a similar work situation and are eligible for paid leave, how should this paid leave period be divided between the mother and the father?” The responses were grouped into four categories that reflected increasing gender

equality with regard to leave preferences: no paid leave, mother-only leave (the mother takes the entire leave period), mother-majority leave (the mother takes most and the father some), and equal or father-majority leave (parents share equally, or the father takes most or all of the leave). The mother-only leave category served as the reference group. This variable captured policy-related gender norms and provided a complementary measure of attitudes towards the division of paid and unpaid care work.

With respect to the measurement of the attitudes of the respondents towards gender and family roles, two composite indices were constructed from a battery of six Likert-type items that captured views on the employment of women and the gendered division of labour. Respondents indicated their agreement with each statement according to a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation revealed a robust two-factor solution consistent with theoretical expectations.

The first component, labelled Women's Employment, reflected attitudes towards the compatibility of maternal employment with family life. It comprised three items: (a) "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work" (reverse-coded), (b) "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works," and (c) "Family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job." The index was computed as the mean score of the three items. Aimed at addressing the issue of missing data, we applied the MEAN.2 function in SPSS, which retained those respondents that provided valid answers for at least two of the three items. This approach served to preserve the quality of the measurement process while avoiding unnecessary case deletion. Higher values indicated more traditional attitudes towards maternal employment.

The second component, labelled Gender Roles, captured beliefs regarding the appropriate division of labour between men and women. It consisted of three items: (a) "What women really want is a home and children," (b) "Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay," and (c) "A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family." The PCA confirmed that the three items loaded strongly upon a single underlying dimension, thus indicating a clear unidimensional structure. Internal consistency was acceptable given the brevity of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx .70$ across countries). In order to maximise the number of valid cases while maintaining measurement reliability, the index was computed as the mean score across the three items and required at least two valid responses per respondent. Higher index values indicated more traditional attitudes. This item captured one of the key dimensions of gender ideology—norms concerning the paid work of women and expectations surrounding gendered family roles—which was central to the theoretical framework of this study.

The cluster solution was predicated on employing a set of attitudinal indicators that encapsulated the broader normative context surrounding the organisation of parental work and care. The variables included reflected key gender ideology and caregiving norm dimensions: attitudes towards gender roles, attitudes towards the employment of women, and the preferred division of paid parental leave. Collectively, these indicators provided for the multidimensional representation of cultural expectations surrounding parental roles.

The three resulting clusters represented empirically derived public attitude configurations rather than predefined regional groupings. The clusters comprised countries that demonstrated similar orientations towards gender, work, and caregiving regardless of their geographical proximity or historical connections.

This data-driven classification approach was subsequently applied as a categorical predictor in the regression models, with Cluster 1 serving as the reference category.

The clusters were as follows:

- Cluster 1 (high-egalitarian norms): Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland;
- Cluster 2 (moderate traditional norms): Italy, Poland, and Slovenia;
- Cluster 3 (strongly gender-traditional norms): Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables, 2022.

Dependent variable	*N*	%
Preferred work–care arrangement model		
Traditional	2,601	16.9%
Semi-traditional	5,679	36.8%
Egalitarian	7,139	46.3%
Independent variables		
Country		
Austria	762	4.9%
Czech Republic	936	6.1%
Denmark	853	5.5%
Finland	827	5.4%
France	1,418	9.2%
Germany	1,052	6.8%
Hungary	973	6.3%
Iceland	739	4.8%
Italy	796	5.2%
Lithuania	960	6.2%
Netherlands	982	6.4%
Norway	723	4.7%
Poland	885	5.7%
Slovakia	785	5.1%
Slovenia	915	5.9%
Switzerland	1,814	11.8%
Sex		
Male	7,244	47.0%
Female	8,175	53.0%
Age		
15–24	1,132	7.3%
25–34	2,188	14.2%
35–44	2,560	16.6%
45–54	2,681	17.4%
55–64	2,845	18.5%
65+	4,012	26.0%
Education		
Primary	2,255	14.6%
Secondary	7,281	47.2%
Tertiary	5,883	38.2%

Table 1. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables, 2022.

Dependent variable	*N*	%
Independent variables		
Paid work status		
In paid work	9,237	59.9%
Not in paid work	2,383	15.5%
Retired	3,799	24.6%
Partnership status		
Living with partner	10,038	65.1%
Partnered but not cohabiting	998	6.5%
No partner	4,382	28.4%
Attendance of religious service		
Frequent	1,822	11.8%
Occasional	5,041	32.7%
Rarely or never	8,557	55.5%
Number of children		
Childless	4,082	26.5%
One child	2,631	17.1%
Two children	5,292	34.3%
Three or more children	3,414	22.1%
Paid leave division		
No paid leave	934	6.1%
Mother-only leave	2,268	14.7%
Mother majority	5,888	38.2%
Equal/Father majority/Father-only leave	6,329	41.0%
Financial difficulty		
Financially strained	3,631	23.6%
Neutral	5,637	36.6%
Financially comfortable	6,150	39.9%
N	15,419	100.0%

Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

3.3. Methods

We applied multinomial logistic regression aimed at examining the extent to which socio-demographic, attitudinal, and contextual factors shape preferences concerning differing work–care arrangements. Since the dependent variable consisted of three nominal categories, this method allowed us to estimate the probability of selecting each of the arrangements relative to the traditional model. Aimed at facilitating the interpretation, the results were presented as average marginal effects (AMEs), which expressed how the individual predictors changed the likelihood of preferring the semi-traditional or egalitarian model.

We estimated three multinomial logistic regression models in a stepwise manner in order to analyse preferences concerning parental work–care arrangements. Model 1 included only the core sociodemographic characteristics so as to capture how individual life circumstances shape preferences. Model 2 added attitudinal variables related to gender ideology—views on the employment of women, traditional gender roles, and preferred parental leave arrangements—in order to assess the explanatory

power of the normative orientations. Model 3 incorporated contextual and structural factors—country-cluster membership, religious practice, and economic situation indicators—aimed at evaluating the extent to which broader cultural and institutional environments influence work–care preferences beyond individual characteristics and attitudes.

We complemented the regression analysis with a hierarchical cluster analysis that grouped the studied countries according to their attitudinal profiles in order to capture broader cross-national patterns. This data-driven typology provided for a more nuanced understanding of cross-country variations than predefined geographical or welfare-state classifications.

Any missing values were handled via listwise deletion. The analytical sample therefore included all the respondents with valid data on the variables applied in the models.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Results

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of preferred parental work–care arrangements across the 16 European countries included in the analysis. The findings indicate significant cross-national variation, with each of the three models—traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian—emerging as the predominant preference in different national contexts.

The egalitarian model—characterised by the equal sharing of paid employment and childcare responsibilities—received the highest level of endorsement in most of the Western and Nordic countries. This preference was particularly strong in Norway (69.3%), followed by Iceland (68.5%), the Netherlands (65.5%), Finland (64.7%), France (64.3%), Denmark (59.9%), and Switzerland (59.1%). While the Nordic countries are typically associated with dual-earner/dual-carer policies and the extensive provision of public childcare services, the Netherlands and Switzerland represent a somewhat different context in which the part-time employment of mothers is common and policy support for fully-shared caregiving is relatively limited. Nevertheless, egalitarian attitudes were found to be common in both these countries, which suggests a normative shift towards greater gender equality even in contexts in which institutional arrangements continue to encourage part-time maternal employment. In contrast, the semi-traditional model, in which mothers participate in paid work but do not occupy the position of the main earner while fathers maintain the primary breadwinner role, is the most favoured arrangement in several Central, Southern, and Western European countries. This preference is particularly evident in Italy (54.0%), followed by Austria (53.5%), Lithuania (51.5%), Germany (46.6%), Slovenia (45.0%), and Hungary (40.0%). These patterns indicate a preference for modified male-breadwinner models wherein maternal employment is accepted, yet mothers are still expected to prioritise caregiving responsibilities, particularly concerning young children.

While the traditional model, wherein mothers remain at home full-time, is the predominant preference only in Slovakia (38.7%), it nevertheless receives relatively strong support in several other post-socialist countries, including Hungary (37.0%), the Czech Republic (33.2%), and Poland (32.6%). These findings suggest that traditional expectations of maternal care are more enduring in Central and Eastern Europe, in line with the

historical legacies of state-socialist family policies that integrated high female employment with persistent gendered expectations regarding caregiving.

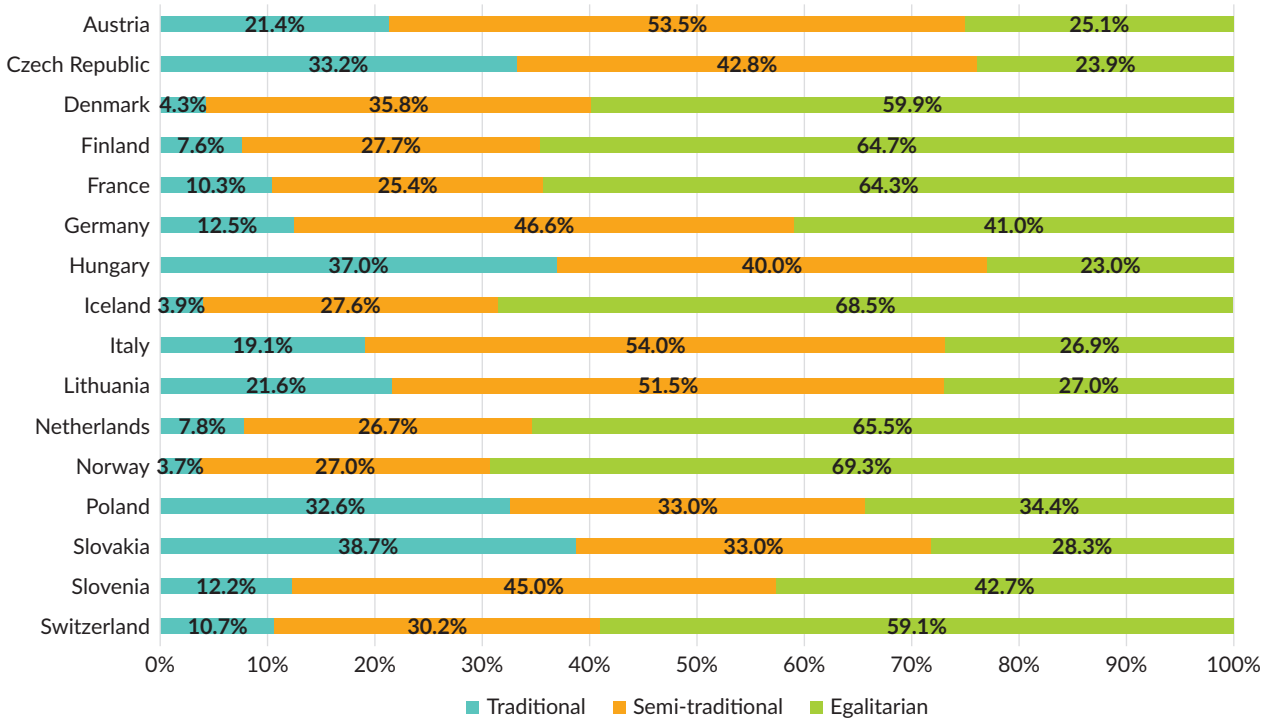


Figure 1. Perception of the preferred parental childcare model, 2022, in %. Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

In summary, the descriptive findings indicate broad cross-national tendencies that partly resemble regional patterns: Egalitarian preferences are more often predominant in Nordic and Western European countries, semi-traditional preferences are prevalent in parts of Central and Southern Europe, and traditional preferences are more evident in post-socialist contexts. These patterns are closely aligned with established theoretical frameworks concerning gender regimes, welfare-state configurations, and the institutional organisation of childcare. Countries with robust public childcare systems and gender-equality-oriented policies tend to endorse the equal distribution of work and caregiving responsibilities, whereas contexts with less developed childcare infrastructures or more traditional cultural norms continue to favour arrangements that assign greater caregiving responsibilities to mothers. This cross-country variation underscores the significance of institutional and normative environments in terms of shaping the perceptions of individuals concerning the ideal organisation of parental care.

4.2. Cluster Analysis Results: Parental Role Attitude Patterns Across the 16 European Countries Considered

A hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted aimed at identifying natural groupings of countries based on similarities in terms of attitudinal profiles across the 16 European countries considered in this study. This method allows for the detection of underlying patterns without imposing any predetermined regional or institutional classifications. The resulting dendrogram (see Figure 2 in the Supplementary File) illustrates the

relational structure of the countries and reveals how they cluster into relatively homogeneous groups; the height of the branches indicates the degree of attitudinal dissimilarity.

The analysis resulted in a three-cluster solution. The first cluster comprised Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, and Iceland. Despite their institutional differences, these countries exhibited relatively egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles, the widespread acceptance of maternal employment, and robust support for more gender-balanced parental leave arrangements. The close grouping of these countries reflected their broadly similar normative orientations towards dual-earner/dual-carer family models, often—but not uniformly—associated with more gender-egalitarian welfare contexts.

The second cluster comprised Italy, Poland, and Slovenia. These countries demonstrated moderately traditional gender-role orientations, placed greater emphasis on maternal caregiving, and exhibited somewhat weaker public support for the full-time employment of women. Despite divergent historical and welfare trajectories, they converged in terms of attitudes that favour the more gendered division of early childcare responsibilities. This cluster occupied an intermediate normative position between the egalitarian orientation of Cluster 1 and the more traditional pattern observed for Cluster 3.

The third cluster consisted of Hungary, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. These countries exhibited the most traditional attitudinal profiles, characterised by a pronounced preference for maternal caregiving and relatively conservative perspectives on gender roles and the division of parental leave. Public attitudes in this cluster placed a greater normative emphasis on mothers as the primary caregivers accompanied by the lower acceptance of equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements.

The three-cluster solution effectively captured distinct normative models concerning parental work and caregiving across Europe. These clusters underscore significant cross-national variations in gender ideologies and caregiving expectations, and provide a valuable typology for forming an understanding of how broader societal contexts influence public perceptions of the appropriate roles of mothers and fathers in early childcare.

4.3. Multivariate Analysis: Predictors of Preferred Work–Care Arrangements

Three multinomial logistic regression models were assessed, applying the traditional model as the reference category. Aimed at facilitating interpretation, the results were presented as AMEs that showed the extent to which individual characteristics impact the probability of preferring either the semi-traditional or the egalitarian models over the traditional model (see Table 2)

4.3.1. Model 1: Sociodemographic Predictors

Model 1, which incorporated only the core sociodemographic variables, indicated that gender, age, and education significantly influence work–care arrangement preferences. Women were more likely to endorse both the semi-traditional and the egalitarian models than men. Age differences reflected a clear generational gradient: Younger respondents were observed to be more supportive of egalitarian arrangements than the older cohorts, who tended to express a preference for more gender-specialised models.

Education also played a significant role. Individuals with a secondary education were found to be more supportive of the non-traditional models than those with lower educational attainment; moreover, the tertiary-educated respondents expressed a pronounced preference for the egalitarian model, thus indicating that higher educational attainment is particularly associated with support for fully gender-equal arrangements.

The influence of the number of children was less pronounced but remained steady. As the number of children increases, a decline is evident in terms of support for the egalitarian model, with a shift in preferences towards semi-traditional or traditional setups. With respect to partnership status, individuals without a partner tended to favour the traditional model and were less inclined towards alternative arrangements; however, this factor exerted only a minor impact.

4.3.2. Model 2: Gender Ideology and Parental Leave Preferences

The introduction of attitudes towards gender roles, the employment of women, and the preferred division of paid parental leave substantially enhanced the explanatory power of the model. Egalitarian gender-role attitudes and support for the employment of women significantly increased the likelihood of a preference for the egalitarian model and decreased support for semi-traditional arrangements.

With respect to preferences regarding paid parental leave, those respondents that favoured equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements were more likely to support the egalitarian model, whereas those that preferred mother-only or mother-majority leave tended to select the semi-traditional model. The inclusion of these attitudinal variables acted to reduce the strength of many of the sociodemographic predictors, thus suggesting that values and normative orientations act to mediate their influence.

4.3.3. Model 3: Contextual and Economic Predictors

Model 3 further included the variables that captured economic conditions, labour-market status, religiosity, and country-cluster membership. Those respondents that were not employed or were retired exhibited a slightly greater probability of preferring the non-traditional models than those in paid work, though the effects were modest.

Perceived financial well-being acted to increase support for egalitarian arrangements and to reduce support for the semi-traditional model, thus indicating that economic security facilitates preferences for the equal sharing of work and care.

The country clusters exhibited strong and consistent effects: Individuals that resided in countries with more traditional gender norms were significantly more likely to support the semi-traditional or traditional models and less likely to endorse the egalitarian model.

Attendance of religious service was also a significant predictor; those respondents who attended religious services infrequently or never were found to be more likely to prefer egalitarian arrangements and less likely to favour the semi-traditional model than frequent religious service attendees.

Notably, these contextual factors retained their significance even when controlling for gender ideology and sociodemographic characteristics, which indicated that work–care model preferences emerge from the interaction of individual beliefs, lived experiences, and the cultural and institutional context.

The analysis across all three models indicated that preferences regarding parental work–care arrangements are influenced by a combination of sociodemographic factors, gender-related attitudes, and broader contextual influences. While women, younger persons, and those with a higher educational attainment tended to favour egalitarian arrangements, these effects weakened once gender ideology and parental-leave beliefs were taken into account. Rather, attitudes towards maternal employment, gender roles, and the division of parental leave emerged as the strongest predictors. Contextual factors—such as financial security, religiosity, and country-level gender norms—further differentiated the preferences of the respondents, which underscored the fact that ideals regarding work–care arrangements reflect both individual orientations and the broader normative environment.

Table 2. AMEs that predicted preferred work–care arrangement.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian
Sex	0.0198***	0.0121***	0.0334**	−0.0252*	0.0311***	−0.0182***
Age						
25–34	0.0042***	−0.0764***	−0.0260**	−0.0094**	0.0360***	0.00035
35–44	0.0089**	−0.0645***	−0.0101*	−0.0149**	0.0275***	−0.00458***
45–54	−0.0018**	−0.0575***	−0.0119*	−0.0164*	0.0327***	−0.00670***
55–64	0.0032	−0.0391**	0.001	−0.0128*	0.0151**	0.00862***
65+	0.0317	−0.0656**	0.02198***	−0.0236***	−0.00657***	−0.0388***
Education						
Secondary	0.0263***	0.0504***	0.0139***	−0.0113	−0.0183**	0.0687***
Tertiary	−0.0654***	0.2574***	−0.0189***	0.0747***	−0.0462***	0.2574***
Number of children						
One child	0.0644	−0.1069***	0.0357***	−0.0411***	0.00216	−0.0329***
Two children	0.0602	−0.0994***	0.0252***	−0.0316***	0.00289	−0.0216***
Three or more children	0.0256**	−0.0772***	−0.0006	−0.0160***	0.0140***	−0.00977***
Partnership status						
Partnered but not cohabiting	0.0177	0.0182	−0.0094	−0.0088	0.0222**	−0.0166***
No partner	−0.0152***	−0.0127***	−0.0223*	0.01295	0.00306	0.0192***
Paid leave division						
Mother-only leave			−0.0732***	0.2051***	−0.1064***	0.1636***
Mother majority			0.1463***	0.0475***	−0.1718***	0.0218***
Equal/Father majority/ Father-only leave			−0.0437***	0.2722***	−0.2046***	0.2346***

Table 2. (Cont.) AMEs that predicted preferred work–care arrangement.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian
Women employment			−0.0549***	0.1023***	−0.0477***	0.0983***
Gender roles			−0.0304***	0.0939***	−0.0593***	0.0792***
Paid work						
Not in paid work					0.0152***	0.0192***
Retired					0.0199***	0.0229***
Financial difficulty						
Neutral					−0.0162***	0.00788***
Financially comfortable					−0.0260***	0.0299***
Clusters						
Moderately Traditional Norms					0.0257***	−0.0523***
Strongly Gender-Traditional Norms					0.0303***	−0.0591***
Attendance of religious service						
Occasional					−0.0394***	0.0141***
Rarely or never					−0.0228***	0.0661***
Nagelkerke R^2	0.082		0.390		0.400	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

5. Conclusion

This study examined public preferences with respect to parental work–care arrangements in 16 European countries applying descriptive analyses, hierarchical clustering, and multinomial regression. Drawing on theoretical perspectives regarding the gender revolution, the interaction between attitudes, institutions, and behaviour, and the evolving ideals of fatherhood, the findings underscored the extent to which normative expectations concerning caregiving roles continue to influence the perceived legitimacy and feasibility of work–care arrangements.

The descriptive findings revealed significant cross-national variations that closely reflected differences in the institutional opportunity structures. Egalitarian preferences were most common in Nordic and most Western European contexts, where established dual-earner/dual-carer policies, shorter working hours, and well-developed childcare systems create institutional conditions that render shared caregiving feasible. In contrast, semi-traditional preferences prevailed in parts of Central and Southern Europe, which reflected welfare contexts in which maternal employment is accepted, yet institutional arrangements continue to promote modified breadwinner models. Traditional preferences were strongest in post-socialist countries, consistent with enduring cultural legacies that valorise maternal caregiving despite high female employment.

This result was consistent with findings from previous comparative empirical research (Fodor et al., 2002; Javornik & Kurowska, 2017; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008)

The cluster analysis confirmed the theoretical expectation that attitudes are not necessarily confined by geographical boundaries; rather, they align with broader normative regimes. The three clusters represented distinct normative configurations: a highly egalitarian cluster, a moderately traditional cluster, and a strongly gender-traditional cluster. These patterns reflected previous findings that the design of institutional policies plays a significant role in terms of shaping the legitimacy of paternal caregiving roles (Haas & Hwang, 2008). The fact that countries with very different welfare histories clustered together attitudinally further highlighted the significance of cultural path-dependencies and shared gender ideologies beyond formal policy frameworks.

The multivariate analysis revealed that sociodemographic factors alone only partially account for support for various work–care arrangements. When gender ideology and parental-leave preferences are considered, these attitudinal factors emerge as central predictors, thus affirming theoretical arguments that attitudes shape—and often limit—the behavioural adoption of egalitarian policies. Support for the employment of women, the rejection of traditional gender roles, and the endorsement of equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements significantly bolster support for egalitarian work–care models. This finding aligns with the theoretical emphasis on attitudes as the normative layer that mediates the connection between institutional opportunities and actual behaviours (Lomazzi et al., 2019). Contextual influences, e.g., attendance of religious service, financial well-being, and country-cluster membership, further confirmed that preferences are embedded within broader cultural and institutional environments, which is consistent with the literature on welfare-state regimes and policy feedback (Pascall & Lewis, 2004).

Overall, the findings indicated a persistent cultural lag in the gender revolution. Although maternal employment is largely normalised across Europe, normative support for fully-shared caregiving lags behind, particularly in contexts in which institutional environments do not strongly encourage paternal involvement (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). In many countries, the semi-traditional model seems to serve as a negotiated compromise between traditional gender norms and contemporary labour market demands. Simultaneously, the rise of egalitarian attitudes—especially among younger, more highly-educated, and gender-egalitarian individuals—reflects ongoing cultural shifts consistent with transformations in fatherhood ideals and the gradual diffusion of the "new father" norm.

This study provides a contribution to the broader debate on gender equality, fatherhood, and the organisation of care by demonstrating that public preferences continue to be shaped by the interplay of structural opportunities, cultural legacies, and normative expectations. Policy reforms that aim to promote more gender-equal caregiving—such as non-transferable father-specific leave, high-quality childcare provision, or public campaigns that aim to normalise paternal involvement—are likely to be most effective when they align with or actively reshape prevailing cultural norms. Future research should investigate the extent to which these attitudinal patterns translate into actual behavioural change and how evolving policy designs interact with shifting social expectations over time. As demographic pressures and persistent gender inequalities remain central policy concerns across Europe, forming a detailed understanding of how citizens evaluate work–care arrangements is essential in terms of designing effective and equitable family policies.

Funding

This study was supported by the Momentum Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences under the LENDULET_2021-78 grant awarded to the author Ivett Szalma.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

The data used in this study are available from the GESIS Data Archive (ISSP Research Group, 2025).

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used the subscription-based version of ChatGPT (OpenAI) to review the manuscript for grammar and style. ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing purposes and not for any other aspect of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

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

References

Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *50*(2), 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.

Altintas, E., & Sullivan, O. (2017). Trends in fathers' contribution to housework and childcare under different welfare policy regimes. *Social Politics*, *24*(1), 81–108. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxw007

André, S., Cammu, N., & Meuleman, E. (2025). Fathers, families, and society: A two-decade systematic literature review on the contexts and consequences of paternity and parental leave for fathers. *Social Sciences*, *14*(3), Article 168. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14030168

Baird, M., Hamilton, M., & Constantin, A. (2021). Gender equality and paid parental leave in Australia: A decade of giant leaps or baby steps? *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *63*(4), 546–567. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856211008219

Beglaubter, J. (2021). "I feel like it's a little bit of a badge of honor": Fathers' leave-taking and the development of caring masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*, *24*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X19874869

Boehnke, M. (2011). Gender role attitudes around the globe: Egalitarian vs. traditional views. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *39*(1), 57–74.

Bornatici, C., & Zinn, I. (2025). Beyond tradition? How gender ideology impacts employment and family arrangements in Swiss couples. *Gender & Society*, *39*(2), 285–320. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432251317464

Burnett, S. B., Gatrell, C. J., Cooper, C. L., & Sparrow, P. (2013). Fathers at work: A ghost in the organizational machine. *Gender, Work, and Organization*, *20*(6), 632–646. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12000

Cabrera, N. J., Volling, B. L., & Barr, R. (2018). Fathers are parents, too! Widening the lens on parenting for children's development. *Child Development Perspectives*, *12*(3), 152–157. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12275

Cascella, C., Pampaka, M., & Williams, J. (2024). Gender attitudes within and between European countries: Regional variations matter. *Sage Open*, *14*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241259912

Castro-García, C., & Pazos-Moran, M. (2016). Parental leave policy and gender equality in Europe. *Feminist Economics*, *22*(3), 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1082033

Ciccia, R., & Verloo, M. (2012). Parental leave regulations and the persistence of the male breadwinner model: Using fuzzy-set ideal type analysis to assess gender equality in an enlarged Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *22*(5), 507–528. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928712456576

Craig, L., & Mullan, K. (2011). How mothers and fathers share childcare: A cross-national time-use comparison. *American Sociological Review*, *76*(6), 834–861. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411427673

Craig, L., & van Tienoven, T. P. (2021). Gendered shares of the family rush hour in fulltime dual earner families. A cross national comparison. *Social Indicators Research*, *153*(1), 385–405. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02489-3

Cunha, V., & Atalaia, S. (2019). The gender(ed) division of labour in Europe: Patterns of practices in 18 EU countries. *Sociologia*, *90*, 113–137. https://doi.org/10.7458/SPP20199015526

Dearing, H. (2016). Designing gender-equalizing parental leave schemes—What can we learn from recent empirical evidence from Europe? *Journal of Family Research*, *28*(1), 38–64. https://doi.org/10.3224/zff.v28i1.22920

Dermott, E. (2003). The 'intimate father': Defining paternal involvement. *Sociological Research Online*, *8*(4), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.859

Deutsch, F. M., Servis, L. J., & Payne, J. D. (2001). Paternal participation in child care and its effects on children's self-esteem and attitudes toward gendered roles. *Journal of Family Issues*, *22*(8), 1000–1024. https://doi.org/10.1177/019251301022008003

Dobrotić, I., & Stropnik, N. (2020). Gender equality and parenting-related leaves in 21 former socialist countries. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(5/6), 495–514. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2019-0065

Doucet, A., & McKay, L. (2020). Fathering, parental leave, impacts, and gender equality: What/how are we measuring? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *40*(5/6), 441–463. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2019-0086

Du, H., Xiao, Y., & Zhao, L. (2021). Education and gender role attitudes. *Journal of Population Economics*, *34*(2), 475–513. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-020-00793-3

Duvander, A.-Z., & Johansson, M. (2019). Does fathers' care spill over? Evaluating reforms in the Swedish parental leave program. *Feminist Economics*, *25*(2), 67–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2018.1474240

Duvander, A.-Z., Mussino, E., & Tervola, J. (2021). Similar negotiations over childcare? A comparative study of fathers' parental leave use in Finland and Sweden. *Societies*, *11*(3), Article 67. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11030067

Edlund, J., & Öun, I. (2016). Who should work and who should care? Attitudes towards the desirable division of labour between mothers and fathers in five European countries. *Acta Sociologica*, *59*(2), 151–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699316631024

Eurostat. (2025a). *Part-time employment and temporary contracts—Annual data (table code: lfsi_pt_a; custom view: 18291678)* [Data set]. Eurostat Data Browser. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_pt_a__custom_18291678/default/table

Eurostat. (2025b). *Percentage of adults in part-time employment by number of children and age of youngest child (table code: lfst_hhptechi; custom view: 18290691)* [Data set]. Eurostat Data Browser. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hhptechi__custom_18290691/default/table

Fodor, E., Glass, C., Kawachi, J., & Popescu, L. (2002). Family policies and gender in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *35*(4), 475–490. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(02)00030-2

Gaunt, R., & Deutsch, F. M. (2024). Mother's instinct? Biological essentialism and parents' involvement in work and childcare. *Sex Roles*, *90*(2), 267–279. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-024-01451-8

Gehringer, A., & Klasen, S. (2017). Labor force participation of women in the EU—What role do family policies play? *Labour*, *31*(1), 15–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/labr.12085

Gornick, J. C., & Meyers, M. K. (2003). Welfare regimes in relation to paid work and care. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *8*, 45–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1040-2608(03)08003-1

Haas, L., & Hwang, C. P. (2008). The Impact of taking parental leave on fathers' participation in childcare and relationships with children: Lessons from Sweden. *Community, Work & Family*, *11*(1), 85–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800701785346

Haas, L., & Rostgaard, T. (2011). Fathers' rights to paid parental leave in the Nordic countries: Consequences for the gendered division of leave. *Community, Work & Family*, *14*(2), 177–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2011.571398

Henwood, K., & Procter, J. (2003). The 'good father': Reading men's accounts of paternal involvement during the transition to first-time fatherhood. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *42*(3), 337–355. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466603322438198

Hobson, B., & Fahlén, S. (2009). Competing scenarios for European fathers: Applying Sen's capabilities and agency framework to work-family balance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *624*(1), 214–233. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334435

Hsiao, H. (2023). A cross-national study of family-friendly policies, gender egalitarianism, and work–family conflict among working parents. *PLoS ONE*, *18*(9), Article e0291127. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291127

ISSP Research Group. (2025). *International social survey programme: Family and changing gender roles V—ISSP 2022 (ZA10000; Version 2.0.0)* [Data set]. GESIS. https://doi.org/10.4232/5.ZA10000.2.0.0

Javornik, J., & Kurowska, A. (2017). Work and care opportunities under different parental leave systems: Gender and class inequalities in Northern Europe. *Social Policy & Administration*, *51*(4), 617–637. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12316

Karu, M., & Kasearu, K. (2011). Slow steps towards dual earner/dual carer family model: Why fathers do not take parental leave. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, *3*(1), 24–38.

Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, *21*(3), 310–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2017.1307806

Knight, C. R., & Brinton, M. C. (2017). One egalitarianism or several? Two decades of gender-role attitude change in Europe. *American Journal of Sociology*, *122*(5), 1485–1532. https://doi.org/10.1086/689814

Lewis, J., & Campbell, M. (2007). UK work/family balance policies and gender equality, 1997–2005. *Social Politics*, *14*(1), 4–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxm005

Li, Q., Knoester, C., & Petts, R. (2021). Cross-national attitudes about paid parental leave offerings for fathers. *Social Science Research*, *96*, Article 102540. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2021.102540

Lomazzi, V., Israel, S., & Crespi, I. (2019). Gender equality in Europe and the effect of work-family balance policies on gender-role attitudes. *Social Sciences*, *8*(1), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8010005

Lütolf, M. (2025). Paternal leave duration and the closure of the gendered family work gap. *Social Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaf017

Lütolf, M., & Stadelmann-Steffen, I. (2023). Do households live the family model they prefer? Household's work patterns across European policy regimes. *Socio-Economic Review*, *21*(3), 1421–1443. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwac023

Mauerer, G. (2023). Paid parental leave in correlation with changing gender role attitudes. *Social Sciences*, *12*(9), Article 490. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090490

McLaughlin, K., & Muldoon, O. (2014). Father identity, involvement and work–family balance: An in-depth interview study. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *24*(5), 439–452. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2183

Meil, G. (2013). European men's use of parental leave and their involvement in child care and housework. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *44*(5), 557–570. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.44.5.557

Miller, T., & Dermott, E. (2015). Contemporary fatherhood: Continuity, change and future. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *4*(2), 179–181. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14281321892287

Novianti, R., Suarman & Islami, N. (2023). Parenting in cultural perspective: A systematic review of paternal role across cultures. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *10*(1), 22–44. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1287

Offer, S., & Kaplan, D. (2021). The "new father" between ideals and practices: New masculinity ideology, gender role attitudes, and fathers' involvement in childcare. *Social Problems*, *68*(4), 986–1009. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spab015

Omidakhsh, N., Sprague, A., & Heymann, J. (2020). Dismantling restrictive gender norms: Can better designed paternal leave policies help? *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *20*(1), 382–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12205

Pascall, G., & Lewis, J. (2004). Emerging gender regimes and policies for gender equality in a wider Europe. *Journal of Social Policy*, *33*(3), 373–394. https://doi.org/10.1017/S004727940400772X

Pavolini, E., Brini, E., & Scherer, S. (2025). The elephant in the family policy room: How care culture influences the effects of public childcare on women's labor market participation in Europe. *Social Indicators Research*, *180*(3), 1619–1637. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-025-03719-2

Pfau-Effinger, B. (2004). Socio-historical paths of the male breadwinner model—An explanation of cross-national differences. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *55*(3), 377–399. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00025.x

Ray, R., Gornick, J. C., & Schmitt, J. (2010). Who cares? Assessing generosity and gender equality in parental leave policy designs in 21 countries. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *20*(3), 196–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928710364434

Rehel, E. M. (2014). When dad stays home too: Paternity leave, gender, and parenting. *Gender & Society*, *28*(1), 110–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213503900

Rollè, L., Gullotta, G., Trombetta, T., Curti, L., Gerino, E., Brustia, P., & Caldarera, A. M. (2019). Father involvement and cognitive development in early and middle childhood: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, Article 02405. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02405

Rostgaard, T., & Ejrnæs, A. (2021). How different parental leave schemes create different take-up patterns: Denmark in Nordic comparison. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(2), 313–324. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i2.3870

Salin, M., Ylikännö, M., & Hakovirta, M. (2018). How to divide paid work and unpaid care between parents? Comparison of attitudes in 22 Western countries. *Social Sciences*, *7*(10), Article 188. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100188

Schindler, S., Schuster, C., Olsson, M. I. T., Froehlich, L., Hübner, A.-K., Block, K., Van Laar, C., Schmader, T., Meeussen, L., van Grootel, S., Croft, A., Sun, M. S., Ainsaar, M., Aarntzen, L., Adamus, M., Anderson, J., Atkinson, C., Avicenna, M., Bąbel, P., . . . Martiny, S. E. (2025). Policy as normative influence? On the relationship between parental leave policy and social norms in gender division of childcare across 48 countries. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *64*(2), Article e12806. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12806

Sjöberg, O. (2004). The role of family policy institutions in explaining gender-role attitudes: A comparative multilevel analysis of thirteen industrialized countries. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *14*(2), 107–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928704042003

Stickney, L. T., & Konrad, A. M. (2012). Societal institutions and work and family gender-role attitudes. *Organization Management Journal*, *9*(4), 236–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/15416518.2012.738528

Szelewa, D., & Polakowski, M. P. (2008). Who cares? Changing patterns of childcare in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *18*(2), 115–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928707087589

Tanturri, M. L., Donno, A., Fahlén, S., Henz, U., & Pailhé, A. (2020). *Fathers' time with children at the crossroads of the gender revolution: A comparative analysis in France, Italy, Sweden and the UK* (Working Paper No. 12). University of Padua. https://www.research.unipd.it/retrieve/e14fb270-3028-3de1-e053-1705fe0ac030/Tanturri_Donno_et_al..pdf

Thévenon, O. (2011). Family policies in OECD countries: A comparative analysis. *Population and Development Review*, *37*(1), 57–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00390.x

About the Authors



Hana Třísková is a PhD student in demography at the Faculty of Science of Charles University. Her research focuses on the reproductive plans of men and women in Central and Eastern European countries, the involvement of fathers in childcare, family policies, the economic conditions of households, and labour market inequalities.



Ivett Szalma (PhD) is a research chair 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 childlessness, attitudes toward same-sex couples, and assisted reproduction. Her most recent publications include "Measuring Attitudes Towards Voluntary Childlessness: Indicators in European Comparative Surveys" (with M. Heers and M. L. Tanturri) and "The Impact of Political-Demographic Considerations on European Attitudes Towards Parenting and Adoption by Same-Sex Couples" (with J. Takács).

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10859
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10859

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Between Supportive and Involved Fatherhood in Slovenia

Alenka Švab [1] and **Živa Humer** [2]

[1] Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
[2] The Peace Institute, Slovenia

Correspondence: Alenka Švab (alenka.svab@fdv.uni-lj.si)

Submitted: 29 June 2025 **Accepted:** 6 October 2025 **Published:** 8 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

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

Keywords

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

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

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

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

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

The following research questions guided the presented study:

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

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

2. A Review of Research on Fatherhood in Slovenia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Four Studies on Involved Fatherhood in Slovenia

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

4.1. Methodology and Characteristics of the Research Samples

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

Table 1. Information about the studies.

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

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the samples.

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

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

5. Results

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

5.1.1. From Assistants to Equal Partners?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.1.3. The Role of Kinship Support Networks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2.1. The Role of Paternity Leave and Involved Fatherhood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2.2. Gendered Patterns in Work–Life Balance

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

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

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

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

5.2.3. Practices of Taking Sick Leave for Childcare

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3. Changes in Social Expectations Regarding Fatherhood and Paternal Identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Discussion and Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgments

Alenka Švab acknowledges the financial support for writing this article from the 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. Živa Humer acknowledges the financial support for writing this article from the research core funding No. P5–0413, Equality and human rights in times of global governance (The Peace Institute, Ljubljana), by the Slovenian Research Agency, 2020–2027, contract no. 1000–20-03662.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Ljubljana—Faculty of Social Sciences and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT for linguistic corrections.

References

André, S., Cammu, N., & Meuleman, E. (2025). Fathers, families, and society: A two-decade systematic literature review on the contexts and consequences of paternity and parental leave for fathers. *Social Sciences*, *14*(3), Article 168. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14030168

Bailey, J. (2015). Understanding contemporary fatherhood: Masculine care and the patriarchal deficit. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *4*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674314X14036152282447

Brandth, B., & Kvande, E. (1998). Masculinity and childcare: The reconstruction of fathering. *The Sociological Review*, *46*(2), 293–313. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00120

Burcar, L. (2015). *Restavracija kapitalizma: Repatriarhalizacija družbe*. Sophia Publishing House.

Craig, L. (2006). Does father care mean fathers share? A comparison of how mothers and fathers in intact families spend their time with children. *Gender & Society*, *20*(2), 259–281. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205285212

Crespi, I., & Ruspini, E. (2015). Transition to fatherhood: New perspectives in the global context of changing men's identities. *International Review of Sociology*, *25*(3),353-358. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2015.1078529

Delphy, C., & Leonard, D. (1996). *Familiar exploitation: A new analysis of marriage in contemporary Western societies*. Polity Press.

DeVault, M. L. (1994). *Feeding the family: The social organization of caring as gendered work*. The University of Chicago Press.

Dobrotić, I., & Stropnik, N. (2020). Gender equality and parenting-related leaves in 21 former socialist countries. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *40*(5/6), 495–514. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2019-0065

Doucet, B. (2016). Single fathers. In C. Shehan (Ed.), *The encyclopaedia of family studies* (pp. 332–335). Wiley.

European Institute for Gender Equality. (2022). *Distribution of housework within the household, by type of housework task*.https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/eige_gap_hw__ggs_hw_distribution/datatable?sex=M&distribution=COMPLETELY_PARTNER&hw_task=HOUSEWORK_CHORES&col=time&row=geo&rowf=EU27_2020%7CBE%7CBG%7CCZ%7CDK%7CDE%7CEE%7CIE%7CEL%7CES%7CFR%7CHR%7CIT%7CCY%7CLV%7CLT%7CLU%7CHU%7CMT%7CNL%7CAT%7CPL%7CPT%7CRO%7CSK%7CFI%7CSE

Eurostat. (2025). *Part-time and full-time employment—Statistics*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/84627.pdf

Fodor, E., Glass, C., Kawachi, J., & Popescu, L. (2002). Family policies and gender in Hungary, Poland and Romania. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *35*, 475–490. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(02)00030-2

Gerson, K. (1997). The social construction of fatherhood. In T. Arendell (Ed.), *Contemporary parenting: Challenges and issues* (pp. 154–195). Sage.

Gíslason, I. V. (2006). *Fostering caring masculinities*. Centre for Gender Equality.

Hearn, J., & Pringle, K. (2006). Men, masculinities and children: Some European perspectives. *Critical Social Policy*, *26*(2), 365–389. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018306062590

Hobson, B., & Morgan, D. (2002). Introduction. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Making Men into Fathers: Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood* (pp. 1–21). University Press.

Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift*. Avon Books.

Hrženjak, M. (2016). *Spremembe očetovstva: Moški med delom in starševstvom*. The Peace Institute.

Hrženjak, M., & Humer, Ž. (2018). Caring masculinities and flexibilisation of labour markets: Fathers in precarious and managerial employment in Slovenia. *Gender Questions*, *6*(1). https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-8457/2977

Huerta, M. C., Adema, W., Baxter, J., Han, W.-J., Lausten, M., Lee, R., & Waldfogel, J. (2014). Fathers' leave and fathers' involvement: Evidence from four OECD countries. *European Journal of Social Security*, *16*(4), 308–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/138826271401600403

Humer, Ž. (2016). Moški na vodstvenih in vodilnih položajih: očetje in delodajalci. In M. Hrženjak (Ed.), *Spremembe očetovstva: Moški med delom in starševstvom* (pp. 79–95). The Peace Institute.

Humer, Ž. (2017). Sodobno očetovstvo med plačanim delom in skrbjo za otroke. *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, *45*(267), 158–170.

Humer, Ž., & Frelih, M. (2016). Praktični preizkus usklajevanja dela in družine za očete na ravni delovnih organizacij. In M. Hrženjak (Ed.), *Spremembe očetovstva: Moški med delom in starševstvom* (pp. 145–171). The Peace Institute.

Humer, Ž., & Hrženjak, M. (2015). *Analiza kvalitativnih intervjujev z očeti na vodilnih in vodstvenih položajih in očeti v prekarnih oblikah zaposlitev*. The Peace Institute.

Javornik, J. (2014). Measuring state de-familialism: Contesting post-socialist exceptionalism. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *24*(3), 240–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928714525815

Jogan, M. (2001). *Seksizem v vsakdanjem življenju*. FDV UL Publishing House.

Jurado, T. (2021, March 26). *Men in Care (MiC)* [Paper presentation]. Project of Life and Skills Development: Different Approaches to Valuing Parenting in Work and Life.

Kanjuo-Mrčela, A., & Černigoj-Sadar, N. (2004). *Starši med delom in družino*. Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Equal Opportunities; Faculty of Social Sciences.

Kanjuo-Mrčela, A., & Černigoj-Sadar, N. (2007). *Delo in družina—s partnerstvom do prijaznega delovnega okolja*. FDV UL Publishing House.

Kanjuo-Mrčela, A., Štebe, J., & Vuga Beršnak, J. (2016). Očetje med službo in domom. In M. Hrženjak (Ed.), *Spremembe očetovstva: Moški med delom in starševstvom* (pp. 21–61). The Peace Institute.

Kaufman, G. (2013). *Superdads: How fathers balance work and family in the 21st century*. New York University Press.

Knijn, T. (1987). Father, the dependent authority. In T. Knjin & A.-C. Mulder (Eds.), *Unravelling fatherhood* (pp. 48–62). Foris Publications.

Knijn, T. (1995). Towards post-paternalism? Social and theoretical changes in fatherhood. In M. van Dongen, G. Frinking, & M. Jacobs (Eds.), *Changing fatherhood: A multidisciplinary perspective* (pp. 1–20). Thesis Publishers.

Korintus, M., & Stropnik, N. (2011). Hungary and Slovenia: Long leave or short? In S. B. Kamerman & P. Moss (Eds.), *The politics of parental leave policies: Children, parenting, gender and the labour market* (pp. 135–159). Policy Press.

Kravchenko, Z., & Robila, M. (2015). Fatherhood and fathering in Eastern Europe. In J. L. Roopnarine (Ed.), *Fathers across cultures: The importance, roles, and diverse practices of dads* (pp. 108–138). Praeger.

Kvande, E. (2015, March 12–14). *Interactions between organizational behaviour and father's quota in parental leave* [Paper presentation]. Fathers and Work Organizations: Inequalities and Capabilities, Rationalities and Politics, Bielefeld University, Germany.

Langvasbråten, T., & Teigen, M. (2006). *FOCUS—The European Dimension*. Institute for Social Research.

Lister, R., Williams, F., Anttonen, A., Bussemaker, J., Gerhard, U., Heinen, J., Johansson, S., Leira, A., Siim, B., Tobio, C., & Gavanas, A. (2007). *Gendering citizenship in Western Europe: New challenges for citizenship research in a cross-national context*. Policy Press.

Lupton, D., & Barclay, L. (1997). *Constructing fatherhood: Discourses and experiences*. Sage.

Lutz, H. (2018). Masculinity, care and stay-behind fathers: A postsocialist perspective. *Critical Sociology*, *44*(7/8), 1061–1076. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517749707

Marks, L., & Palkovitz, R. (2004). American fatherhood types: The good, the bad, and the uninterested. *Fathering*, *2*, 113–129. http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/7693

Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1173–1191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01173.x

Mihalinec, E. (2025). Svet starih staršev: Sociološka analiza starostarševanja v Sloveniji. *Teorija in praksa*, *62*(3), 550–577.

Mikulioniene, S., & Kanopiene, V. (2015). Construction of fatherhood in late socialism: The experiences of Lithuanian men. *International Review of Sociology*, *25*(3), 387–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2015.1078530

Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. (2014). *The parental protection and family benefits act, ZSDP-1*.

Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. (2018). *Resolution on family policy 2018–2028*.

Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. (2025). *Data set provided upon authors' request* [Unpublished raw data].

Morgan, D. H. J. (2011). *Rethinking family practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.

National Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Slovenia. (2025). *Spremstvo pri porodu po statističnih regijah, Slovenija, letno*. https://podatki.nijz.si/pxweb/sl/NIJZ%20podatkovni%20portal/NIJZ%20podatkovni%20portal__1%20Zdravstveno%20stanje%20prebivalstva__03%20Porodi%20in%20rojstva/PIS_TB_4.px/table/tableViewLayout2

Nentwich, J. C. (2008). New fathers and mothers as gender troublemakers? Exploring discursive constructions of heterosexual parenthood in parenting magazines. *Feminism & Psychology*, *18*(2), 207–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507088591

Novikova, I. (2012). Fatherhood and masculinity in post-socialist contexts—Lost in translation? In M. Oechsle, U. Müller, & S. Hess (Eds.), *Fatherhood in late modernity: Cultural images, social practices, structural frames* (pp. 95–112). Verlag Barbara Budrich. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvddzvgg

Parsons, T., & Bales, R. F. (1959). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. The Free Press.

Ranson, G. (2001). Men at work: Change—Or no change?—In the era of the "new father." *Men and Masculinities*, *4*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X01004001001

Rener, T. (1993). Politika materinjenja ali "Father knows the best: for him the play, for her the rest." *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo*, *21*(162/163), 15–22.

Rener, T., Humer, Ž., Žakelj, T., Vezovnik, A., & Švab, A. (2008). *Novo očetovstvo v Sloveniji*. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

Rener, T., Sedmak, M., Švab, A., & Urek, M. (2006). *Družine in družinsko življenje v Sloveniji*. Annales.

Rener, T., Švab, A., Žakelj, T., & Humer, Ž. (2005). *Perspektive novega očetovstva v Sloveniji: Vpliv mehanizma očetovskega dopusta na aktivno očetovanje*. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

Robnik, S. (2012). *Enakost spolov v družinskem življenju in partnerskih odnosih*. Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

Segal, L. (1990). *Slow motion—Changing masculinities, changing men*. Virago.

Seidler, V. (1997). *Man enough: Embodying masculinities*. Sage.

Šori, I. (2016). Vpliv zaposlitve, strukture gospodinjstva in stališč o enakosti spolov na delitev družinskega dela. In M. Hrženjak (Ed.), *Spremembe očetovstva: Moški med delom in starševstvom* (pp. 97–117). The Peace Institute.

Stacey, J. (2006). Gay parenthood and the decline of paternity as we knew it. *Sexualities*, *9*(1), 27–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706060687

Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. (2025). *Delež otrok, vključenih v vrtce, po občini stalnega prebivališča in starostnih obdobjih, Slovenija, letno*. Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/-/0971412S.PX

Stropnik, N. (1997). *Ekonomski vidiki starševstva*. Znanstveno in publicistično središče.

Stropnik, N. (2020). Slovenia. In A. Koslowski, S. Blum, I. Dobrotić, G. Kaufman, & P. Moss (Eds.), *16th international review of leave policies and related research 2020* (pp. 513–523). Fern University. https://doi.org/10.18445/20200915-131331-0

Stropnik, N., Humer, Ž., Kanjuo-Mrčela, A., & Štebe, J. (2019). The problem is in practice: Policy support and employer support for fathers' participation in childcare in Slovenia. *Community, Work & Family*, *22*(1), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1558175

Stropnik, N., & Šircelj, M. (2008). Slovenia: Generous family policy without evidence of any fertility impact. *Demographic Research*, *19*, 1019–1058. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2008.19.26

Švab, A. (2001). *Družina: Od modernosti k postmodernosti*. Znanstveno in publicistično središče.

Švab, A., & Humer, Ž. (2013). "I only have to ask him, and he does it…" Active fatherhood and (perceptions of)

division of family labour in Slovenia. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *44*(1), 57–78. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.44.1.57

Švab, A., Rener, T., & Kuhar, M. (2012). Behind and beyond Hajnal's line: Families and family life in Slovenia. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *43*(3), 419–437. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.43.3.419

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Tereskinas, A. (2022). Emotional capital and its uses in Lithuanian middle-class fathers' narratives. *Social Sciences*, *11*(6), Article 261. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060261

Tomšič, V. (1980). *Ženska v razvoju socialistične samoupravne Jugoslavije*. Delavska enotnost, Naša žena.

Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.

van Dongen, M. C. P., Frinking, G. A. B., & Jacobs, M. J. G. (1995). *Changing fatherhood: A multidisciplinary perspective*. Thesis Publishers.

Vojnovič, M. (1995). *Situacijska analiza o položaju otrok in družin v Sloveniji*. Slovenian Committee for UNICEF.

Wall, G., & Arnold, S. (2007). How involved is involved fatherhood? An exploration of the contemporary culture of fatherhood. *Gender & Society*, *21*(4), 508–527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207304973

Williams, S. (2008). What is fatherhood?: Searching for the reflexive father. *Sociology*, *42*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508088837

Windwehr, J., Duvander, A.-Z., Ellingsæter, A. L., Eydal, G. B., Humer, Ž., & Nakazato, H. (2022). The Nordic model of father quotas in leave policies: A case of policy transfer? *Social Politics*, *29*(1), 190–214. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa041

Zavrl, N. (1999). *Očetovanje in otroštvo*. Znanstveno in publicistično središče.

About the Authors



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.



Živa Humer (PhD), sociologist, is a research fellow at the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, focusing on long-term care. She is also affiliated with the Peace Institute, where she researches gender equality, care work, fatherhood, and work–life balance in national and EU projects.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10903
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10903

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

The Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting Among Lithuanian Men

Aušra Maslauskaitė [1] and Roma Jusienė [2]

[1] Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania
[2] Vilnius University, Lithuania

Correspondence: Aušra Maslauskaitė (ausra.maslauskaite@vdu.lt)

Submitted: 4 July 2025 **Accepted:** 27 November 2025 **Published:** 21 January 2026

Issue: This article 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 article aims to analyze the intergenerational transmission of parenting among Lithuanian men. Numerous studies have proven that parenting can be transmitted intergenerationally, with both supportive and harsh parenting behaviours being passed on. However, to the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of evidence stemming from Central and Eastern European countries where, in recent decades, substantial shifts have taken place in the family gender roles and cultural scripts of parenting. Little is known about the transmission of psychological control as a parenting practice. Furthermore, most of the existing evidence on intergenerational transmission is drawn from the samples of mothers. This study is based on a large-scale representative cohort dataset encompassing middle-aged men born in the 1970s and 1980s (N = 1,745). This study's main finding is the continuity of the intergenerational transmission of parenting despite major socio-cultural shifts related to gender and family in society. We found that men's emotionally warm fathering was linked to having experienced supportive parenting during childhood. Conversely, behavioural control in fathering was attributed to the experience of authoritarian parenting in childhood. Men's psychological control, as a fathering practice, was associated with both supportive and authoritarian parenting experienced in childhood, although the predictive value was low. Additionally, the study revealed that men's parenting was associated with their personality traits and parental self-efficacy. The relationship between men's fathering and socio-economic characteristics was inconsistent.

Keywords

fathering; intergenerational transmission; parenting practices; paternal self-efficacy; personality traits; socioeconomic status

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

European societies place an increasing emphasis on fathers' involvement in child rearing. This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors, including social policy initiatives, shifts in cultural values and attitudes, and other societal developments. Evidence shows that men, no longer being exclusively breadwinners, are frequently expected to share caring responsibilities with their partners (Huerta et al., 2013). Consequently, researchers are demonstrating a growing interest in the field of fatherhood and its leading factors. Many studies acknowledge the significance of fathering for human cognitive and social development, both in childhood and later adulthood. Nonetheless, this area remains less extensively researched (Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Garcia et al., 2020; Huerta et al., 2013; Liu & Lachman, 2019; Madden et al., 2015; McWayne et al., 2013; Sebre et al., 2015) compared to the subject of motherhood and mothering, which attracts more scientific attention (Goldscheider, 2024; Vollig & Palkovitz, 2021). Even less evidence is available regarding the impact of the parenting style experienced in childhood on the role played by men of the next generation. Insufficient/little research has been conducted into the impact of the father's presence on the involvement of young adult sons in parenting roles (Bouchard, 2012; Brown et al., 2018; Furstenberg & Weiss, 2008). There are also studies that document and/or highlight possible links between parenting practices exhibited in one generation and the parenting behaviours in the subsequent generation (see Brown et al., 2018; Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Choi et al., 2021; Hofferth et al., 2012; Madden et al., 2015; Neppl et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the studies focusing on the transmission of fathering (instead of mothering), and in culturally and historically diverse societies, are scarce/insufficient.

This study takes an intergenerational approach to examining the significance of parenting styles experienced in childhood for the Lithuanian middle-aged men's fathering practices with their own children. Our focus lies on the relational aspects of fatherhood rather than the quantitative aspects of father–child relations. Consequently, we examine father involvement by analysing the attitudinal (e.g., the self-reported paternal self-efficacy and the perception of one's own parenting role), and behavioural components of fathering (e.g., behavioural/direct control, emotional warmth, and psychological control, the main fathering practices, revealing various ways in which men engage/interact with their children). We examine the links between parenting experienced in childhood and practised fathering in adulthood, considering how these links are associated with the father's personality traits as well as individual and family-level factors.

Our analysis is based on representative data obtained from the Families and Inequalities Survey conducted in Lithuania in two waves, in 2019 and 2021 (Maslauskaitė et al., 2021). Using the dataset has several advantages. First, it is a large-scale survey (N = 4,000) with a large subsample of fathers. Second, to our knowledge, the Families and Inequalities Survey, so far, is the only one of its kind in Lithuania, providing a broader perspective on the factors contributing to involved fathering, including the intergenerational context.

Having regained independence more than three decades ago, Lithuania has been undergoing a complex socio-economic transition that has profoundly affected family life and gender roles. A notable characteristic of the transition period in Lithuania, like in many other countries of the region, was the refamiliarization of family policies accompanied by a pronounced cultural shift towards neo-patriarchal gender attitudes (Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Nevertheless, contemporary developments in family policies do not escape complexities or contradictions. Lithuania has distinguished itself by its childcare policies that foster father involvement and thereby promote gender equality in childcare (Aidukaite, 2021; Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020).

In 2007, a month of paternity leave was introduced in Lithuania, whereby parental leave could be shared. Despite legally ensured possibilities for involved fathering, the role of men in Lithuania is still—at least publicly—traditional (Lomazzi, 2022). Childcare responsibilities in families have been predominantly fulfilled by mothers (Maslauskaite, 2022). Despite the occurrence of cultural shifts in the ideas about fatherhood, the discourse surrounding the nurturing role of men and involved fatherhood remains marginal, with a greater emphasis being placed on the traditional masculine role of the male provider (Tereskinas, 2022).

The present article makes several contributions to the existing literature on the subject. First, it employs an inquiry-based approach to exploring the transmission of parenting styles across generations. The analysis of this multifaceted phenomenon aims to shed light on the underlying factors that shape the contemporary conceptions of fatherhood. Second, it makes a methodological contribution to the existing research on fatherhood by integrating psychological and sociological perspectives, thereby expanding our knowledge of the processes involved in fathering. Third, the body of fathering research conducted in Central and Eastern European countries still remains substantially more modest compared to the scope of fathering research available in Western Europe and North America.

2. Parenting and Its Determinants: Previous Evidence

The psychological and sociological literature typically defines the involvement of fathers through quantitative and qualitative measures (see Choi et al., 2021; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Lamb, 2008; McWayne et al., 2013). Quantitative aspects capture the presence or absence of a father, the duration of childcare, and the time spent with the child. However, the involvement of fathers could be examined by observing the specific parenting practices or behaviours based on the qualitative aspects of the father-child relationship, such as emotional warmth in the parent–child relationship and adequate control in parenting.

The conceptualisation of parenting in psychological literature is characterised by a long and rich tradition, with the dimensional approach being a widely utilised methodology. Two broad dimensions of parenting have been identified: parental support and parental control, or demandingness, further comprising several distinct parenting styles. Parental support has been shown to manifest in the form of emotional warmth, acceptance, availability, and responsiveness (Baumrind, 1971; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). The control dimension is further subdivided into two: behaviour control and psychological control (Barber, 2002). The term "behaviour control" is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of disciplinary strategies, rules, and attempts to control behaviour, as well as forms of punishment. Psychological control can be defined as the manipulation of a child's emotions and behaviour through psychological means (Barber, 1996, 2002).

There is evidence that parenting may be transmitted intergenerationally (Belsky et al., 2009; Chen & Kaplan, 2001; van Ijzendoorn, 1992). Van Ijzendoorn (1992) defined intergenerational transmission of parenting as the process by which an earlier generation purposely or unintentionally exerts its influence on the parenting attitudes and behaviours of the next generation. Furthermore, evidence was provided for the innate predispositions and contextual continuity of this process (van Ijzendoorn, 1992). The intergenerational continuity of parenting in more recent studies is also explained by the direct effects of early parenting experiences on later parenting practices through social modelling and interpersonal relations (Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Choi et al., 2021; Hofferth et al., 2012; Neppl et al., 2009). However, several factors (e.g., individual psychological characteristics, family structure and dynamics, socioeconomic factors, cultural

influences) can also contribute to or modify this intergenerational continuity. As Belsky and Barends (2002) and Belsky et al. (2009) claim, parenting is multiply determined, although the studies on mediating and moderating factors of parental transmission remain scarce and scant.

A substantial body of research is found to document a link between parenting styles and the Big Five personality traits like openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism (or negative emotionality and emotional instability), and agreeableness (Belsky & Barends, 2002; Newland et al., 2013; Tehrani et al., 2024). Again, these studies were predominantly conducted with mothers and/or explored the parenting effects on personality traits in childhood (Tehrani et al., 2024). A few studies have provided evidence for the direct transmission of personality traits and parenting styles (Kitamura et al., 2009). The emotional challenges experienced by parents and adverse childhood experiences have also been demonstrated to exert an influence on adult mental health and personality formation, and have been shown to be transmissible to subsequent generations (Kaasbøll et al., 2024; Narayan et al., 2021). As Belsky and Barends (2002) have claimed, a parent's personality is the most important determinant of parenting which indicates that a parent who is psychologically healthy and mature (e.g., low in neuroticism, high in extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness, and high in self-esteem), could provide more supportive, sensitive, responsive parenting, despite the adversity in his own experience as a child.

Additionally, as demonstrated in the study by Garcia et al. (2018), individuals from neglectful and authoritarian homes demonstrated the lowest levels of self-esteem. These experiences may function as a model for social learning and contribute to lower self-efficacy in general, specifically in the context of parental self-efficacy, also yielding a more negative attitude to one's own parental role. Thus, parenting styles are also related to how parents perceive their role. Parental self-efficacy refers to parents' confidence in their ability to positively influence their children's development (Eccles & Harold, 1996). There is consistent evidence that higher parental self-efficacy is linked with more effective parenting styles and behaviour (for a review, see Albanese et al., 2019).

Socioeconomic status (SES) is another set of variables consistently addressed in parenting studies, again, with the disproportionate focus on mothering (Roubinov & Boyce, 2017). Furthermore, the results of its effects on parenting styles are not consistent, depending at least on two methodological considerations: what specific components of socioeconomic variables were included; whether these were analysed as the correlates, main predictors, or the mediators of effects. For instance, a recent study by Kaasbøll et al. (2024) found that SES had a modest effect in reducing the links between parental depression, anxiety, and parenting. In contrast, Roubinov and Boyce (2017) claim that the socioeconomic conditions may exert an influence on parenting through the effects on parental mental health and via differential access to resources. The most consistent research findings demonstrate that low SES family environments, and especially limited education, are associated with harsh and more punitive parenting practices (Liu & Lachman, 2019; Ma, 2023; Roubinov & Boyce, 2017). The existing literature, most notably the recent article of Ma (2023), and the preceding discourse of Roubinov and Boyce (2017), both reach the conclusion that the relationship between SES and parenting is complex and subject to variation across different contexts.

Last but not least, a more extensive examination of the existing literature about parenting reveals a consensus among researchers that an analysis of the intergenerational transmission of parenting must encompass the considerations of culture, temporality, and the prevailing social context (see Brannen et al., 2011; Roubinov & Boyce, 2017; Sebre et al., 2015; van Ijzendoorn, 1992).

Our study aims to investigate whether paternal parenting practices are associated with the experiences undergone during childhood. In addition, based on the literature review, it is suggested that an increased presence of adaptive personality traits, such as reduced negative emotionality (neuroticism) and heightened conscientiousness, may serve as supplementary critical predictors of paternal involvement. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the significance of SES variables, we propose that less favourable SES can add to more controlling (but not supportive) fathering. We hypothesize that:

> H1: Fathering based on emotional warmth is predicted by supportive parenting experienced by his parents in childhood; a higher level of conscientiousness, parental self-efficacy, and a lower level of negative emotionality may serve as supplementary critical predictors of paternal involvement.
>
> H2: Fathering based on behavioural control, characterized by harshness, is associated with less supportive and more authoritarian parenting during the father's childhood, as well as less favourable SES and personality traits.
>
> H3: Fathering based on psychological control is also related to the provision of support during the father's childhood, albeit in an ambiguous manner regarding experienced authoritarian parenting, and to higher levels of negative emotionality and less favourable SES.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Sample and Methods of Analysis

Our analysis is based on the dataset obtained from the Families and Inequalities Survey (Maslauskaitė et al., 2021). The data were collected in Lithuania in two waves: in 2019 and 2021. The survey was designed as a cohort study where the sample was limited to the 1970–1984 birth cohorts in the first wave, followed by adding the cohorts born in 1985–1989 in the second wave. The effective sample size comprised 3000 respondents in the first wave and 1000 respondents in the second wave. Therefore, at the time of the survey, the respondents were aged 35–49 (the first wave) and 32–36 (the second wave).

The representative sample was obtained using a stratified sampling technique. In both waves, face-to-face interviews using a standardised questionnaire were conducted with respondents in their homes. The CAPI methodology for collecting the data was used. Though 2021 was the year of Covid-19, the fieldwork was conducted in the period after the social restrictions had been lifted. The fieldwork of both waves was contracted by the Baltic Surveys Ltd., a public opinion and market research company, a member of the Gallup Organization and ESOMAR. All ethical standards were adhered to, including the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and data protection.

The survey covered a wide range of topics related to the respondents' parental home, lifestyle, partnership and fertility history, parenting, household, well-being, and employment conditions. The second wave also included some additional variables related to Covid-19. The duration of an individual interview in the pilot survey was between 40 and 90 minutes; the information on the duration was not collected in the main survey.

The two datasets were merged by adding the cases from the second wave to the first wave. A total of 1,745 men were included in the dataset; however, for the analysis, we selected a subsample of men with children residing with the children in the same household (N = 1,104, with 832 cases from 2019 and 272 from the 2021 survey). The main analysis was based on the stepwise OLS regression applied to each fathering style. However, in the initial stages of our study, the bivariate correlation analysis was applied.

3.2. Variables and Measures

3.2.1. Fathering as the Main Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is fathering, which, in this study, refers to a father's set of specific behaviours with their child, e.g., parental practices. It is measured by a shortened version of the Parenting Practices Questionnaire (PPQ; see Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Sebre et al., 2015). The PPQ instrument contains 13 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81). The PPQ has three subscales: emotional warmth (EW), behavioural control (BC), and psychological control (PC). The exploratory factor analysis resulted in a three-factor solution (PCA and varimax rotation, cumulative loadings 60%). For further analysis, each factor was transformed into the index summary variable and standardised by the number of items.

The EW subscale includes the following items:

- I often show my child that I love him/her.
- I often tell my child that I appreciate what he/she is trying to do or achieve.
- I respect my child's opinion.
- When my child misbehaves, I talk to him/her about it and discuss what happened.
- I often joke with my child.

The EW parenting practice represents emotional closeness, appreciation, respect, guidance, and support.

The BC subscale includes the items:

- When my child misbehaves, I punish him or her.
- I teach my child that he or she will be punished in some way if he or she misbehaves.
- I think it can be useful to scold a child.

Original PPQ also includes the item: When my child misbehaves, I clap my child with my hand. However, this item was excluded from the analysis due to the prosecution of a child's maltreatment case in Lithuania, which was actively represented in the media and consequently might affected the self-censorship of the parents at the time of the interviews.

The PC subscale includes the items:

- My child needs to understand how much I have sacrificed for him/her.
- I think my child needs to understand how much I have done for him/her.
- I expect my child to appreciate and be grateful for all the comforts he/she has.

- My child must not keep secrets from his/her parents.

The reliability is good for all three subscales: EW Cronbach's alpha = 0.79; BC Cronbach's alpha = 0.76; PC Cronbach's alpha = 0.72).

3.2.2. Control Variables

Following the theoretical discussion of the intergenerational transmission of parenting styles, four sets of controls were included in our analysis.

The measures related to the respondent's childhood were experienced parenting styles and the quality of the relationships with his parents. These measures were the main independent variables.

The parenting style experienced in childhood was measured by seven items, each evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (Cronbach alpha = 0.66). The exploratory factor analysis with PCA and the varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation resulted in a two-factor solution (factor cumulative loadings 62%). The factors were extracted and transformed into the standardised summary index variables.

The first index variable included the following statements:

- My parents were always interested in my school grades.
- When I misbehaved, my parents would talk to me first, discuss what happened.
- If there was a problem, my parents would help me with my homework.
- My parents would encourage me to do well in my studies.
- I was able to tell my parents (or at least one of them) what I was worried about, what I felt.

This variable expresses emotional closeness and support experienced in childhood. The first subscale was labelled "experienced supportive parenting" (Cronbach alpha = 0.85). The second summary index variable includes two items:

- I was punished if I did something wrong.
- My parents paid little attention to my opinions.

The variable was labelled "experienced authoritarian parenting."

The third variable related to the respondent's childhood is a retrospective subjective assessment of the quality of the relationship between the respondent and his/her parents up to the age of 15 (relationships with parents in childhood). It was measured on an 11-point scale ranging from very bad (0) to very good (10).

Personality traits were measured using the Big Five Extra Short Inventory (BFI-2-XS; Soto & John, 2017). The BFI-2-XS was developed, translated, and adapted for Lithuanian use by Rita Žukauskienė and her team; the permission to use it was granted, for which the authors are grateful (Poškus & Žukauskienė, 2017). The BFI-2-XS contains 15 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale consists of five subscales, each of which contains three items: extraversion (Cronbach alpha = 0.63), agreeableness (Cronbach alpha = 0.33),

conscientiousness (Cronbach alpha = 0.72), negative emotionality (Cronbach alpha = 0.76), openness (Cronbach alpha = 0.44). Due to the insufficient Cronbach alpha values, for further analysis, we used only three subscales of the BFI-2-X: extraversion, conscientiousness, and negative emotionality.

Satisfaction with one's own parenthood was measured by two scales. First, the overall perception of one's own parenting role (how satisfied are men with their role as fathers) was measured with the scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much satisfied*). Second, the parental self-efficacy was measured with nine items on a 5-point scale. The scale includes the subscales on efficacy (I can meet the needs of my child/children very well; I can put into practice what I want to pursue in child care and parenting; I feel helpless in parenting and caring for my children), parental role autonomy (I have the feeling that taking care of my child/children takes up all my strength and that my whole life revolves around it; I feel trapped by my parental duties; both items reverse), enjoyment of parenting (I enjoy being with my children), and excessive worry (Sometimes I cannot sleep at night because I imagine that something could happen to my child; I am always worrying that something could happen to my child/children; both items reverse). We compiled/constructed/designed a summary index variable accumulating all the items (Cronbach alpha = 0.72).

The individual and family level characteristics included in the analysis are as follows: the respondent's education, the number of children living in the same household, and the subjective evaluation of the financial security of the family. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive sample statistics.

	Column percent	Means (SD)
Fathering (paternal practices)		
EW (1–5)		3.8 (.64)
BC (1–5)		3.0 (.77)
PC (1–5)		3.3 (.64)
Parenting experienced in childhood		
Experienced supportive parenting (1–5)		3.5 (.67)
Experienced authoritarian parenting (1–5)		3.2 (.63)
Relations with parents in childhood (0–10)		7.0 (1.7)
Personality traits		
Extraversion (1–5)		3.2 (.75)
Conscientiousness (1–5)		3.7 (.79)
Negative Emotionality (1–5)		2.4 (.84)
Parenting assessment		
Perception of one's own parenting role (0–10)		7.5 (.05)
Parental self-efficacy (1–5)		3.6 (.01)

Table 1. (Cont.) Descriptive sample statistics.

	Column percent	Means (SD)
Individual and structural family characteristics		
Number of children in the household (ref.: two or more)	48	
Financial security of the household (0–10)		6.4 (.05)
Education: Highest (university 6 years or more)	24	
Education: Medium (university 4 years or similar)	23.2	
Education: Secondary	42.7	
Education: Lower than secondary	9.7	
Number of subjects	1104	

Source: Families and Inequalities Survey (2019–2021).

4. Results

4.1. Fathering and Experienced Parenting in Childhood

The correlation analysis revealed a positive interrelationship between the father's EW and the supportive parenting respondents had experienced in their childhood (Table 2). The BC was associated with the men being exposed to an authoritarian parenting style in their childhood ($r = 0.151$, $p < 0.001$). Whereas PC was positively correlated with an experienced supportive parenting style in one's childhood ($r = 0.181$, $p < 0.001$).

Moreover, experienced supportive parenting was positively associated with relationship quality with parents, which was negatively associated with the authoritarian parenting style. The bivariate correlational analysis also proved the positive link between an experienced supportive parenting style and such personality traits as extraversion and conscientiousness, while a negative association was found with the negative emotionality trait. Experienced supportive parenting was positively linked to the perception of the fathering

Table 2. Bivariate correlations of dependent and main independent variables.

	Experienced Supporting Parenting	Experienced Authoritarian Parenting
EW in fathering	.269**	–.070*
BC in fathering	.014	.151**
PC in fathering	.181**	.016
Relations with parents in one's childhood	.411**	–.141**
Extraversion	.247**	–.104**
Conscientiousness	.333**	–.137**
Negative Emotionality	–.263**	.110**
Perception of one's own Parenting Role	.175**	–.152**
Parental Self-Efficacy	.176**	–.110**
	1074	1075

Source: Families and Inequalities Survey (2019–2021). Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; statistically significant coefficients are marked in bold; there are missing data on the dimensions of the parental self-efficacy and the perception of parenting role.

role and higher degrees of reported parental self-efficacy. In addition, an experienced authoritarian parenting style was negatively associated with the reported quality of the relationship with parents in one's childhood. The negative direction was observed for the personality traits extraversion and conscientiousness, but the reverse direction was found for negative emotionality. The experienced authoritarian parenting style was also negatively associated with the men's perception of their fathering role and the parental self-efficacy.

4.2. Emotional Warmth in Fathering

Multiple regression models showed robust results for the intergenerational transmission of parenting (Table 3). The positive association between EW in fathering and the experienced supportive parenting style in respondents' childhood was evident in all models. The baseline model (Model I) included the measures of experienced parenting and men's assessment of the quality of their relationship with their parents until the age of 15. There was a positive directionality for both indicators. As the next step following our theoretical considerations, we included the personality characteristics of the respondent. The effects on the intergenerational transmission of parenting remained, but the coefficient decreased, so that personality traits contributed to explaining part of it. Out of three personality traits (extraversion, conscientiousness, and negative emotionality), only one—conscientiousness—contributed to explaining the EW in fathering one's own children. The coefficients were positive and indicated the same direction, i.e., higher scores on conscientiousness were linked to higher scores on EW fathering (Model II). Model III added the controls for the respondent's perception of parenting role and parental self-efficacy. All the controls included in the previous models showed stability in the direction and very marginal differences in the magnitude. A higher score of parental self-efficacy predicted more EW; thus, men who felt more efficient in their parenting also demonstrated higher levels of EW as a fathering practice. The perception of one's own parenting role does not contribute to the explanation of EW in fathering.

The final Model IV, in addition to all the variables, included father's education, the number of children, and the perceived financial security ($R^2 = 0.23$). Supplementary controls did not distort the main associations observed in the previous models. However, we observed the additional positive effects related to the extraversion trait and the men's perception of a parental role. Thus, EW was linked to the experienced supportive parenting style, the extraversion and conscientiousness traits, a positive perception of one's own parenting role, and higher self-efficacy, after the men's education and the number of children were controlled for. In addition, having more than one child increased the likelihood of an EW in fathering. Financial security had a negative coefficient, while EW was not related to education. The relative importance of variables in the final model was the highest for the respondent's parental self-efficacy (std. $\beta = 0.23$), followed by the experienced supportive parenting style (std. $\beta = 0.18$), conscientiousness (std. $\beta = 0.17$), men's satisfaction with their parental role (std. $\beta = 0.11$), and the extraversion trait (std. $\beta = 0.10$).

Table 3. OLS regression results for fathers' EW.

	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors
Experienced supportive parenting	.196***	.046	.139***	.044	.141***	.044	.166***	.044
Experienced authoritarian parenting	.003	.042	.030	.040	.049	.040	.048	.039
Relations with parents in one's childhood	.033*	.018	.019	.017	.002	.018	.005	.018
Extraversion			.048	.040	.061	.039	.088**	.040
Conscientiousness			.202***	.049	.147***	.050	.135***	.049
Negative emotionality			−.035	.045	.036	.047	.038	.047
Perception of one's own parenting role (0–10)					.036	.024	.055**	.025
Parental self-efficacy					.247***	.062	.270***	.063
Financial security							−.042**	.017
Education: University (MA or higher)							−.071	.120
Education: College							−.049	.114
Education: Secondary							−.003	.109
Number of children in the household: Two or more vs. one							.136***	.049
R^2	.069		.163		.199		.230	

Source: Families and Inequalities Survey (2019–2021). Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

4.3. Behavioural Control in Fathering

Model I proved the statistically significant positive association between the BC as a fathering practice and the experienced authoritarian parenting style (Table 4). The baseline model also controlled for the quality of the respondent's relationships with parents in childhood. The direction of the coefficient was negative, meaning that the BC was linked to a negative relationship quality with parents in childhood. Model II added controls for the respondent's personality. The effect size for the experienced authoritarian parenting decreased, which means that other variables contributed to the explanation. Of the three personality traits, only conscientiousness was relevant, but the effect was negative. Thus, the lower the conscientiousness, the more pronounced the BC in fathering. Model III extended the analysis, and after adding men's perception of their own parenting role and parental self-efficacy, the effect of personality traits disappeared. However, the effects of the experienced authoritarian parenting style on BC remained. BC was also negatively associated with parental self-efficacy and men's perception of their own parenting role. It can be explained that men engaging in BC showed less parental self-efficacy and had lower satisfaction with their role as fathers.

In Model IV, there was the stability of the main effects observed in the previous model, but there was the significant effect of father's education and the number of children. Fathers with lower education were more likely to use the BC. There was also a positive coefficient for the number of children. Though the financial security was significant, the p-value was high ($p < 0.1$). Overall, Model IV had the highest R-squared value (= 0.161). The measures with the highest relative importance in the model were the experienced authoritarian parenting (std. $\beta = 0.21$), the respondents' parental self-efficacy (std. $\beta = -0.12$), and the perception of one's own parenting role (std. $\beta = -0.11$).

Table 4. OLS regression results for fathers' BC.

	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors
Experienced supportive parenting	−.048	.061	−.010	.061	−.016	.061	−.024	.062
Experienced authoritarian parenting	.316***	.056	.298***	.055	.279***	.056	.258***	.055
Relations with parents in childhood	−.046*	.024	−.036	.024	−.016	.025	−.020	.025
Extraversion			−.010	.055	−.019	.055	−.022	.056
Conscientiousness			−.122*	.068	−.081	.070	−.075	.069
Negative emotionality			.061	.062	.010	.066	.019	.065
Perception of own parenting role (0–10)					−.057*	.034	−.080**	.035
Parental self-efficacy					−.149*	.087	−.170*	.087
Financial security							.038*	.023
Education: University (MA or higher)							.214	.168
Education: College							.380**	.158
Education: Secondary							.342**	.152
Number of children in the household: Two or more vs. one							.195**	.068
R^2	.08		.10		.122		.161	

Source: Families and Inequalities Survey (2019–2021). Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

4.4. Psychological Control in Fathering

The PC fathering practice was positively associated with the experienced supportive parenting and authoritarian parenting in the respondents' childhood (Table 5, Model I). Model II included the respondents' personality traits as well as baseline controls. The effects of the experienced parenting styles remained, but there were positive and statistically significant coefficients for negative emotionality and conscientiousness;

however, the effect size and the statistical significance for conscientiousness was lower ($p < 0.1$). Therefore, men with the negative emotionality personality trait were more likely to engage in PC in fathering. In the next step of the analysis, we added the perception of one's own parenting role and parental self-efficacy; however, both variables were not statistically significant (Model III). Model IV was supplemented by men's education, financial security, and the number of children. The R-square was low (0.09), yet it was acceptable considering the complex phenomena studied (Ozili, 2022). In the final model, we observed the stable effects in the direction and the size for both parenting styles experienced in men's childhood. The negative emotionality of the respondent had a positive association with PC as a fathering practice. The same result was also observed for the number of children. The negative emotionality (std. $\beta = 0.20$) and the experienced supportive parenting style (std. $\beta = 0.19$) had the highest predictive power, followed by the experienced authoritarian parenting style (std. $\beta = 0.14$).

Table 5. OLS regression results for PC.

	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors	b	Std. errors
Experienced Supportive Parenting	.152***	.048	.160***	.048	.164***	.048	.187***	.050
Experienced Authoritarian Parenting	.136***	.044	.131***	.044	.139***	.044	.134***	.044
Relations with Parents in Childhood	.011	.019	.016	.019	.006	.020	.008	.020
Extraversion			−.052	.044	−.050	.044	−.036	.045
Conscientiousness			.102*	.054	.093*	.055	.089	.056
Negative Emotionality			.142***	.049	.151***	.052	.158**	.052
Perception of one's own Parenting Role (0–10)					.035	.027	.039	.028
Parental Self-Efficacy					.006	.069	.019	.070
Financial Security							−.012	.019
Education: University (MA or higher)							−.083	.135
Education: College							−.076	.127
Education: Secondary							−.001	.122
Number of Children in the Household: Two or more vs. One							.142**	.055
R^2	.04		.07		.07		.09	

Source: Families and Inequalities Survey (2019). Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyze fathering from the perspective of the intergenerational transmission of parenting. To this end, we used a sample of Lithuanian men born in the 1970s and 1980s who were in their middle adulthood and raising their own children. Fathering in this study was defined as everyday parental practices with a child and was empirically measured using the well-known scales of EW, BC, and PC (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Sebre et al., 2015).

As expected, men's parenting practices were associated with their childhood experiences, even when additional variables such as personality traits, parental self-efficacy, perception of one's own parental role, and sociodemographic factors were taken into account. Fathers' emotionally responsive and warm relations with their children were best predicted by supportive parenting experienced in childhood (H1). The personality trait conscientiousness and parental self-efficacy were additional significant predictors that explained/accounted for up to 20% of the total variance in the data. Extraversion, also a more positive perception of one's own parenting role, having more than one child in the household, and, interestingly, lower financial security were/proved to be significant predictors, although together they explained only 4% of the variation in the EW in fathering.

These results align with those of several other studies that provide evidence for the intergenerational transmission of positive paternal involvement (Brown et al., 2018; Hofferth et al., 2012; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Narayan et al., 2021). As expected, fathers who reported higher levels of parental self-efficacy were also more involved in fostering emotional and warm relationships with their children, a finding also reported in a recent study by Shim and Lim (2019). Financial security has a mildly negative effect in our study, which is somewhat surprising given the evidence of an association between a higher SES and more supportive and emotionally close parenting styles (Ma, 2023; Roubinov & Boyce, 2017). There are at least a couple of possible explanations for this. First, financial security in this study was subjectively reported and therefore does not necessarily represent the objective/actual financial status. Second, the perception of financial security is a sensitive and inconsistent variable that can change depending on the situational context. Notably, part of the data was collected during the pandemic, and this might also be reflected in the subjective perceptions. It is worth noting that paternal EW was not explained by other sociodemographic variables in our present study, which shows it to be highly related to early experiences in childhood (e.g., supportive parenting) and to more conscious and efficient parenting practices with one's own child. Therefore, this study also highlights the importance of encouraging positive paternal practices and interventions that aim to increase paternal self-efficacy.

Our study explains fathers' BC stemming from authoritarian parenting experienced in childhood, lower self-efficacy, and a less positive perception of their own parenting role (H2). Fathers' lower level of education was an additional significant predictor of BC, and, together with having more than one child in the household, it significantly increased the determination coefficient from 12 to 16%. None of the personality traits explored in this study were significant in predicting BC as a parenting practice. Studies on the intergenerational transmission of harsher, more direct behaviourally controlling parenting reveal similar results, although they emphasise the need to research the mediation and moderation effects, in particular, the mechanisms between early experiences and later fathering (Belsky et al., 2009). This is because the linear and/or direct associations between adverse childhood experiences and later parenting behaviours are not always clear or effective (Hofferth et al., 2012; Narayan et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the BC exhibited in parenting and authoritarian parenting may have different connotations and manifestations in various cultural contexts. It can also be explained by a social learning theory, which reveals the transmission of the direct BC through modelling and the observation of consequent interpersonal interactions (Chen & Kaplan, 2001; Choi et al., 2021; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018). Moreover, the finding of our study that lower paternal education is an additional predictor for higher BC in fathering a child suggests that more attention should be paid to providing men with knowledge on supportive parenting when they become parents.

Finally, we observed that fathers' PC was also interrelated with the parenting experienced in childhood. However, both the supportive and authoritarian parenting experienced in childhood were positively associated with psychologically controlling fathering (H3). Furthermore, negative emotionality (neuroticism) and having more than one child were additional predictors, and, importantly, none of the factors representing men's SES were significant predictors of the PC. Our findings are novel and noteworthy, regardless of the fact that the determination coefficient in predicting the father's PC was rather low, indicating the existence of other factors not researched in the present study. First, the concept of PC itself, as well as the cultural or contextual meaning attributed to it, requires further clarification and discussion. The findings of our previous study (Sebre et al., 2015) have revealed that PC has diverse effects on child emotional and behavioural adjustment in Latvia and Lithuania, two neighbouring countries, which is a call for further studies, especially in countries and cultures with more collectivist and guilt-producing values, or with historically complex backgrounds, in order to ascertain the main antecedents and consequences of PC in parenting (Sebre et al., 2015). Second, based on the results of our study, it could be presumed that PC, as a parenting practice, results from inconsistent and conflict-provoking experiences. However, this premise requires further evidence-based support.

Notably, according to our study, the number of children in a family was related to a higher likelihood of adopting all fathering practices. This means that fathers with more than one child in the household are more involved in parenting and use a wider variety of styles and practices when interacting with their children. This is not surprising, given that children within the same family can have different temperaments and exhibit various behaviours. Furthermore, child characteristics may influence parenting behaviours, as well as the other way around (Belsky & Barends, 2002; Yankati & Patil, 2024). Therefore, future studies on parental involvement should consider the exact number of children, their ages, and their individual characteristics.

The present study has several important strengths. It focuses on the psychological and sociodemographic variables of paternal practices, considers the specific time and cultural context, and uses the data from a large, representative sample. However, the study also has several limitations, primarily due to its cross-sectional nature and reliance on self-reports. First, the parenting experienced in childhood was assessed retrospectively and could therefore be biased by recent attitudes and situations. Moreover, the experienced parenting and the relationships with parents in one's childhood were assessed considering both parents together. This could also affect the internal consistency of the scales for the experienced parenting (these were satisfactory); further studies should use more precise and valid scales, as well as separate reports for both parents (caregivers). Other measures used in this study, such as parental self-efficacy, recent parenting practices, and personality traits, were also self-reported. Further studies of fathers' involvement and the intergenerational transmission of parenting should also consider the complex interplay of objectively measured psychological, structural, and contextual factors. Finally, we highly encourage

conducting studies on both positive and adverse childhood experiences, together with other researchers in the field (e.g., Narayan et al., 2021), in order to provide evidence-based prevention of harsh parenting and intervention in family adversity, especially in recognising and breaking the intergenerational transmission of it (Belsky et al., 2009).

In his comprehensive overview of father involvement, Lamb (2008) noted that there is much greater consensus about "good mothers" than "good fathers." Building on Lamb's idea, it is important to elaborate further on what constitutes "good fathering," which can result in a more favourable personality and social interactions in general, as well as better psychological adjustment and father-child interactions in particular.

This discussion is of relevance when considered within the socio-cultural context of transitional societies. Lithuania's childcare policies, which have been in effect for nearly two decades, are designed to encourage active paternal engagement and promote a more equitable gender balance. Nevertheless, the discourse on involved fatherhood remains marginal, as it does the shift towards a more nurturing role for men. The limited success of the policies aimed at the equalisation of care may be attributable to the intergenerational mechanisms of parenting. It is therefore evident that, in order to trigger change, there is a necessity to complement childcare policies with a variety of initiatives that promote supportive parenting.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Vytautas Magnus University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data are available at the Fertility and Family Research Infrastructure Depository. The Dataset will be provided upon reasonable request (contact the corresponding author).

LLMs Disclosure

In preparing this article, large language models (DeepL) were used for language and style editing to improve clarity and coherence.

References

Aidukaite, J. (2021). Family support systems in the Baltic and Nordic countries: An explorative overview. J. Aidukaitė, S. E. O. Hort, & S. Kuhnle (Eds.), *Challenges to the welfare state* (pp. 11–32). Edvard Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839106118.00009

Albanese, A. M., Russo, G. R., & Geller, P. A. (2019). The role of parental self-efficacy in parent and child well-being: A systematic review of associated outcomes. Child: Care, Health and Development, *45*(3), 333–363. https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12661

Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J.-E. (2005). The role of parenting styles in children's problem behavior. *Child Development*, *76*(6), 1144–1159. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00840.x-i1

Barber, B. K. (1996). Parental psychological control: Revisiting a neglected construct. *Child Development*, *67*(6), 3296–3319. https://doi.org/10.2307/1131780

Barber, B. K. (2002). Reintroducing parental psychological control. In B. K. Barber (Ed.), *Intrusive parenting: How psychological control affects children and adolescents* (pp. 3–11). American Psychological Association.

Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology*, *4*(1, Pt. 2), 1–103. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0030372

Belsky, J., & Barends, N. (2002). Personality and parenting. In M. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Being and becoming a parent* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 415–438). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Belsky, J., Conger, R., & Capaldi, D. M. (2009). The intergenerational transmission of parenting: Introduction to the special section. *Developmental Psychology*, *45*(5), 1201–1204. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016245

Bouchard, G. (2012). Intergenerational transmission and transition to fatherhood: A mediated-moderation model of paternal engagement. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*(5), 747–755. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029391

Brannen, J., Parutis, V., Mooney, A., & Wigfall, V. (2011). Fathers and intergenerational transmission in social context. *Ethics and Education*, *6*(2), 155–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2011.622986

Brown, G. L., Kogan, S. M., & Kim, J. (2018). From fathers to sons: The intergenerational transmission of parenting behavior among African American young men. *Family Process*, *57*(1), 165–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12273

Chen, Z.-Y., & Kaplan, H. B. (2001). Intergenerational transmission of constructive parenting. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*, 17–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00017.x

Choi, J., Kim, H. K., Capaldi, D. M., & Snodgrass, J. J. (2021). Long-term effects of father involvement in childhood on their son's physiological stress regulation system in adulthood. *Developmental Psychobiology*, *63*(6), Article 22152. https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.22152

Dobrotić, I., & Stropnik, N. (2020). Gender equality and parenting-related leaves in 21 former socialist countries. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(5/6), 495–514. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2019-0065

Eccles, J. S., & Harold, R. D. (1996). Family involvement in children's and adolescents' schooling. In A. Booth & J. F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family–school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 3–34). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Furstenberg, F. F., & Weiss, C. C. (2008). Intergenerational transmission of fathering roles in at-risk families. *Marriage and Family Review*, *29*(2/3), 181–201. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_11

Garcia, O. F., Fuentes, M. C., Gracia, E., Serra, E., & Garcia, F. (2020). Parenting warmth and strictness across three generations: Parenting styles and psychosocial adjustment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*, Article 7487. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17207487

Garcia, O. F., Serra, E., Zacarés, J. J., & Garcia, F. (2018). Parenting styles and short- and long-term socialization outcomes: A study among Spanish adolescents and older adults. *Psychosocial Intervention*, *27*(3), 153–161. https://doi.org/10.5093/pi2018a21

Goldscheider, F. (2024). The future of family demography: Filling in the fourth cell. In R. Schoen (Ed.), *The demography of transforming families* (pp. 13–20). Springer.

Hofferth, S. L., Pleck, J. H., & Vesely, C. K. (2012). The transmission of parenting from fathers to sons. *Parenting Science and Practice*, *12*(4), 282–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2012.709153

Huerta, M. C., Adema W., Baxter, J., Han, W.-J., Lausten, M., Lee, R., & Waldfogel, J. (2013). *Fathers' leave, fathers' involvement and child development: Are they related? Evidence from four OECD countries*. OECD.

Jessee, V., & Adamsons, K. (2018). Father involvement and father–child relationship quality: An intergenerational perspective. *Parenting*, *18*(1), 28-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2018.1405700

Kaasbøll, J., Berg, M. N., & Storhaug, A. S. (2024). Mental health and parenting practices and styles among parents receiving child welfare services in Norway: A cross-sectional study. *Child and Family Social Work*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13226

Kitamura, T., Shikai, N., Uji, M., Hiramura, H., Tanaka, N., & Shono, M. (2009). Intergenerational transmission of parenting style and personality: Direct influence or mediation? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *18*(5), 541–556. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9256-z

Kuppens, S., & Ceulemans, E. (2019). Parenting styles: A closer look at a well-known concept. Journal of Child and Family Studies, *28*, 168–181. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1242-x

Lamb, M. E. (2008). The history of research on father involvement. *Marriage & Family Review*, *29*(2/3), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03

Liu, Y., & Lachman, M. E. (2019). Socioeconomic status and parenting style from childhood: Long-term effects on cognitive function in middle and later adulthood. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *74*(6), e13–e24. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbz034

Lomazzi, V. (2022). Gender equality values and cultural orientations. In R. Luijkx, T. Reeskens, & I. Sieben (Eds.), *Reflections on European values: Honouring Loek Halman's contribution to the European Values Study*. Open Press TiU. https://doi.org/10.26116/09eq-y488

Ma, K. (2023). The role of family socioeconomic status in parenting styles and practices. In Z. Zhan, F. P. Chew, & M. T. Anthony (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2022 International Conference on Science Education and Art Appreciation*. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-05-3_4

Madden, V., Domoney, J., Aumayer, K., Sethna, V., Iles, J., Hubbard, I., Giannakakis, A., Psychogiou, L., & Ramchandani, P. (2015). Intergenerational transmission of parenting: Findings from a UK longitudinal study. *European Journal of Public Health*, *25*(6), 1030–1035. https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv093

Maslauskaite, A. (2022). Lithuania's gender revolutions: Reversed and stalled. In L. Zilinskiene & M. Ilic (Eds.), *Soviet and Post-Soviet Lithuania—Generational experiences* (pp. 191–209). Routledge.

Maslauskaitė, A., Platūkytė, E., Dryžaitė, I., & Indriliūnaitė, R. (2021). *Šeimų ir nelygybių tyrimas. Skalių vadovas*. Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas. https://www.vdu.lt/cris/entities/publication/03b909ae-28be-44fb-bf01-3c22ab8c0071

McWayne, C., Downer, J. T., Campos, R., & Harris, R. D. (2013). Father involvement during early childhood and its association with children's early learning: A meta-analysis. *Early Education & Development*, *24*(6), 898–922. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.746932

Narayan, A. J., Lieberman, A. F., & Masten, A. S. (2021). Intergenerational transmission and prevention of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). *Clinical Psychology Review*, *85*, Article 101997. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.101997

Neppl, T. K., Conger, R. D., Scaramella, L. V., & Ontai, L. L. (2009). Intergenerational continuity in parenting behavior: mediating pathways and child effects. *Developmental Psychology*, *45*(5), 1241–1256. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014850

Newland, R. P., Crnic, K. A., Cox, M. J., Mills-Koonce, W. R., & Family Life Project Key Investigators. (2013). The family model stress and maternal psychological symptoms: Mediated pathways from economic hardship to parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *27*(1), 96–105. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031112

Ozili, P. K. (2022). *The acceptable R-square in empirical modelling for social science research* (Paper No. 11579). MPRA. https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/115769

Poškus, M. S., & Žukauskienė, R. (2017). Predicting adolescents' recycling behavior among different big five personality types. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *54*, 57–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2017.10.003

Roubinov, D. S., & Boyce, T. W. (2017). Parenting and SES: Relative values or enduring principles? *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *15*, 162–167. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.03.001

Saxonberg, S., & Sirovátka, T. (2006). Failing family policy in post-communist central Europe. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis Research and Practice*, *8*(2), 185–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/13876980600682089

Sebre, B. S., Jusiene, R., Dapkevice, E., Skreitule-Pikse, I., & Bieliauskaite, R. (2015). Parenting dimensions in relation to pre-schoolers' behaviour problems in Latvia and Lithuania. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *39*(5), 458–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025414548774

Shim, S. Y., & Lim, S. A. (2019). Paternal self-efficacy, fathering, and children's behavioral problems in Korea. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *28*(3), 851–859. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-01310-7

Soto, C. J., & John, O. P. (2017). The next Big Five Inventory (BFI-2): Developing and assessing a hierarchical model with 15 facets to enhance bandwidth, fidelity, and predictive power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *113*(1), 117. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000155

Tehrani, H. D., Yamini, S., & Vazsony, A. T. (2024). Parenting styles and Big Five personality traits among adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *216*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112421

Tereskinas, A. (2022). Emotional capital and its uses in Lithuanian middle-class fathers' narratives. *Social Sciences*, *11*(6), Article 261. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060261

van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (1992). Intergenerational transmission of parenting: A review of studies in nonclinical populations. *Developmental Review*, *12*(1), 76–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(92)90004-L

Yankati, A. V., & Patil, M. (2024). Parenting styles of parents of rural and urban preschool children: Child correlated factors. *International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development*, *7*(3), 445–451. https://doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2024.v7.i3e.445

About the Authors



Aušra Maslauskaitė is a family demographer and sociologist who is affiliated with Vytautas Magnus University. Her research interests include demographic processes, fertility, family demography, and family processes, as well as gender and family.



Roma Jusienė is a professor of psychology and the director of the Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Vilnius University. Her main research interests are the development of self-regulation, developmental and health issues of screen-based media use in children and youth, and family psychology.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10884
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10884

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

More Helpers Than Sharers? Barriers to Involved Fathering in Hungary

Zsuzsanna Makay and **Zsuzsanna Veroszta**

HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute, Hungary

Correspondence: Zsuzsanna Makay (makay@demografia.hu)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 15 December 2025 **Published:** 9 February 2026

Issue: This article 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

Fathers face conflicting expectations as both involved caregivers and traditional breadwinners. This study examines the tensions of this dual role using data from the Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary birth cohort study, analyzing responses from over 1,700 fathers of 18-month-old children collected between October 2019 and December 2020, using linear regression models. We assess how fathers' workloads, perceived work–family conflict, and fathering-role attitudes—their own and their partners'—relate to the division of caregiving tasks on weekdays and weekends. Results show that caregiving remains largely the mother's responsibility, with fathers reporting relatively low involvement. Moreover, longer working hours and higher work–family conflict are associated with reduced paternal involvement in childcare tasks. Egalitarian attitudes—particularly fathers'—are linked to greater paternal engagement, especially on weekdays, where a one-unit increase in the fathering index is associated with a 10.6% increase in task-sharing. This suggests that egalitarian attitudes may be most consequential during weekdays, when fathers face time constraints and competing priorities, compared to more flexible weekend periods.

Keywords

egalitarian attitudes; Hungary; parental tasks; paternal involvement; work–family conflict; workload

1. Introduction

The positive effect of fathers' growing involvement in early childcare on their children's development and on the wellbeing of family members is well-established (Cabrera et al., 2000). Behind this growing involvement lies a broader transformation in paternal roles, a recalibration of family dynamics, and a reconfiguration of

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

fathers' work–family balance. However, this restructuring is not always seamless, and workplace demands do not necessarily accommodate the new challenges associated with new fatherhood ideals. Men who become fathers may therefore find themselves caught in a conflict of expectations, as they strive to meet both the demands of the involved, nurturing father and those of the traditional male breadwinner model (Wall et al., 2007).

In what follows, we examine the tensions inherent in this dual role within the Hungarian context, where shifts in gender role attitudes toward more egalitarian values are observable among both women and men (Murinkó, 2014), yet where economic pressures on fathers remain considerable (Hobson et al., 2011).

Our treatment of the concept of fathering in this analysis examines the dynamic interplay between practical actions and value-based factors, in relation to broader aspects of family functioning. Specifically, we consider the interrelationship among a man's roles as father, partner, and breadwinner, which collectively shape diverse fathering patterns (Wall et al., 2007). In this regard, the concept of father involvement can be extended to include differences in time use between mothers and fathers (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Henz, 2022; McGinnity & Russell, 2008; Yeung et al., 2001) as well as variations in the nature of parental activities (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020)—for instance, the differentiation between play and caregiving as distinct maternal and paternal tasks (Lamb, 2000; Parke, 1996).

Previous research has extensively documented persistent gender differences in parental involvement, showing that mothers typically assume a greater share of childcare responsibilities than fathers (Bianchi et al., 2000). However, less attention has been paid to how fathers' participation relates simultaneously to their work demands and to their underlying attitudes toward gender roles. Moreover, earlier studies have rarely distinguished between fathers' involvement on weekdays and weekends, even though such temporal variation may shed light on how work constraints and preferences interact in shaping caregiving patterns.

The present study contributes to this literature by examining the associations between fathers' involvement in childcare, their attitudes, and the timing of their engagement across weekdays and weekends. While the analysis focuses on a single point in time and thus cannot capture trends or infer causal relationships, it provides valuable insights into how work-related pressures and attitudinal orientations are linked to fathers' everyday caregiving practices.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Concept of Involved Fathering

The theoretical framework of our study is based on the psychosocial model of father involvement developed by Cabrera and colleagues, which assumes reciprocal influences between fathers' individual characteristics—such as their social background, behaviours, and attitudes—those of other family members, and the surrounding structural factors, such as working, cultural, and economic conditions (Cabrera et al., 2014; Diniz et al., 2021). The examination of paternal involvement in this study is situated within the conceptual framework of "fathering." In line with Doucet's definition, we understand fathering as relational sets of practices and identities (Doucet, 2013). Accordingly, our analytical approach includes not only the practical dimension (i.e., the gendered division of caregiving tasks), but also fathers' gender role attitudes.

In conceptualizing fathering as a set of caregiving practices, we draw on parental investment theory as a source of theoretical grounding (Fox & Bruce, 2001).

In the context of domestic labor division, it is important to emphasize that fathers' emotional and caregiving involvement generates new forms of masculinities. However, these roles are not automatic; they are contingent upon normative expectations and structural conditions. The evolving concepts of fatherhood illustrate this shift. "Involved fatherhood" refers to a societal change whereby fathers participate actively in their children's lives not merely as financial providers ("breadwinners"), but through direct caregiving responsibilities. Involvement encompasses multiple dimensions: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility (Lamb, 2004). Building on this, "intimate fatherhood" (Dermott, 2014) highlights a paradigm shift emphasizing emotional closeness, nurturing, and intimacy in fathering, challenging conventional patriarchal masculinity and introducing new norms of masculinity (Hanlon, 2012).

Hence, the operationalization of paternal involvement in our study largely follows the quantifiable dimensions approach, focusing on the frequency of actual one-on-one interaction with the child—caregiving activities that require direct engagement. This is consistent with more recent empirical approaches in the study of modern fatherhood (Lamb, 2000). In addition to the behavioural dimension, we also distinguish between traditional and involved fatherhood (based on attitudinal measures) since paternal attitudinal factors play a significant role in father involvement (Parke, 1996).

The development of modern, involved fatherhood throughout the 20th century has been shaped by a range of social processes (Cabrera et al., 2000). Among the most significant of these is the increasing rate of female labour-force participation (Lamb, 2000), which—alongside other macro-level factors such as economic growth, cultural context, and welfare systems—has shaped the division of domestic labour (Fuwa, 2004). The value and practice shifts associated with these societal transformations have not occurred uniformly; rather, they are closely linked to variations in socioeconomic background (Frank & Frenette, 2021).

2.2. Gender Role Attitudes and the Division of Childcare

International data indicate that although the gender gap in the division of labour between parents has significantly narrowed since the 1960s, the majority of household and childcare responsibilities continue to be carried out by women across all countries (Bianchi et al., 2000; Murinkó, 2014). Men's participation in domestic work may also be hindered by women's "gatekeeping role" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Trends in gender and family attitudes across Europe suggest a measurable correlation between the acceptance of gender inequalities and the distribution of childcare tasks (Murinkó, 2014). On the one hand, paternal value priorities towards traditional, conservative values are associated with less father involvement in childcare (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020). On the other hand, more egalitarian gender-role beliefs (Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Keizer, 2015) or a stronger identification with the father role (Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016) predict greater paternal involvement. However, discrepancy is also recognized between expressed values and actual practices (Forsberg, 2007). Alongside the concept of the "new father," the strengthening of "new man" or "new masculinity" values among men also points toward increasing emotional engagement and parental responsibility—but not necessarily in the domain of routine care (Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Although several sociodemographic variables mediate the relationship between value priorities and involvement in childcare (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Fuwa, 2004), recent data by Milkie and colleagues from the 2003–2023 American

Time Use Survey demonstrate that the gender gap has narrowed in both the area of housework and childcare (Milkie et al., 2025). The most pronounced decline was observed in core housework activities, where men's increased involvement appears to reflect behavioral and normative changes. In contrast, women's reduced engagement in both housework and childcare tasks mainly reflects changes in the population's composition (i.e., women's higher education, their increased working hours and earnings, and demographic ageing).

2.3. Work–Family Balance in Fathering

The work–family balance phenomenon (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) incorporates the idea that fathers' time spent in paid work interacts with a range of socio-demographic and economic factors—such as race, class, and income—but it is also closely associated with traditional versus modern gender role attitudes (Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011), which in turn are reflected in the amount of time fathers spend with their children (Bulanda, 2004). The effort to reconcile work and family expectations often leads to elevated stress levels among parents following the birth of a child (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Hobson and Fahlén (2009), using European Social Survey data, found that most fathers would prefer to reduce their workload—even at the cost of lower pay. Their findings also highlighted the relatively disadvantaged position of Central and Eastern European fathers in achieving work–family balance, due to both economic constraints and prevailing normative expectations. The actual reduction in working hours appears to be more likely the mother's response to work–family conflict (Reynolds, 2005). Workplace norms can also be understood as a meaningful factor in shaping or explaining fathers' involvement (Takács, 2020). According to Yeh et al. (2021), fathers show different involvement during weekdays and the weekend, which is shaped by their educational level, number of children, and the interaction between education and income. Based on data from the 2005 European Working Conditions Survey, Meil (2014) found, in addition, that men's involvement in childcare is negatively correlated with their working hours.

2.4. Socioeconomic Background Characteristics

Adverse economic conditions tend to reinforce more gender-traditional arrangements, both in the division of labor and in the distribution of parental leave (Plantin, 2007). Economic bargaining also influences how labor is divided between partners. Within this framework, the allocation of household tasks—often regarded as the least desirable activities—reflects greater gender inequality than the division of childcare responsibilities (Sullivan, 2021). Even within the domain of childcare, however, certain tasks are more strongly preferred by fathers, particularly those involving more interactive or enjoyable activities with children (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Socioeconomic background also plays a critical role in shaping levels of parental involvement. In particular, educational inequalities—most notably the mother's level of education—emerge as a key determinant (Gracia & Ghysels, 2017; Naujoks, 2024).

2.5. Child Characteristics and Paternal Involvement

The early postnatal period—infancy—requires parents to engage in distinct types of childcare activities that correspond to the child's developmental stages. During this period, caregiving tends to be more oriented toward basic, routine functions rather than interactive or playful tasks (Waldfogel, 2009). These latter activities tend to become more predominant at later ages (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010); consequently, for fathers,

time spent with infants is more likely to be experienced as stressful due to the predominance of physical care tasks (Roeters & Gracia, 2016). Barnett and Baruch (1987) found that, among several other determinants, the child's sex had a significant effect on paternal participation, both in terms of interaction time and engagement in childcare tasks, with a tendency toward greater involvement with sons. Using a Swiss sample of fathers with 18-month-old children, Rouyer et al. (2007) likewise found greater paternal involvement among fathers of boys in terms of childcare activities. Research suggests that the birth of a first child exerts a particularly strong influence on paternal involvement, on the restructuring of work–family balance, and on the formation of paternal identity (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019; Barclay & Lupton, 1999). Grunow et al. (2012) examined how the division of labor between partners shifted after the birth of the first child, showing that income differences increasingly drove couples toward a more traditional gendered arrangement. Veroszta (2023), comparing mothers' responses collected during pregnancy and when the child was six months old, found that in Hungary, having additional children increases women's household workload in general, but it is after the first birth that the balance of housework between partners tilts most strongly against women. Yeh et al. (2021) found higher levels of father involvement in smaller-sized families, particularly in the caring and nurturing dimensions. According to Kuo et al. (2018), after the birth of a second child, fathers tend to increase their involvement with the infant while decreasing their involvement with the firstborn.

2.6. Fatherhood in the Hungarian Context

According to the 2006 Eurobarometer survey comparing European countries, values regarding maternal employment versus childcare are more conservative in Hungary than the EU-25 average. For Hungarian respondents, the mother is perceived as the primary caregiver of children, often prioritizing childcare over paid work, and thus occupies a more dominant role within the family (Testa, 2006). At the same time, fathering roles are showing signs of change. Expectations traditionally associated with male roles—such as providing security—continue to exert influence, and these coexist with emerging, non-traditional norms and expectations (Spéder, 2011). As a result, men are increasingly subject to a dual set of expectations—a "double burden"—which places simultaneous demands on them to fulfil both traditional and modern fatherhood roles (Makay & Spéder, 2018). Moreover, efforts to achieve a work–family balance are hindered by labour market and economic constraints, which tend to push families with young children toward increased work intensity in order to ensure financial security (Hobson et al., 2011).

At the same time, Hungary's relatively generous parental leave policies have long encouraged mothers to remain at home for extended periods after childbirth (Makay, 2015). For nearly half a century, these policies have supported maternal childcare for at least two years per child, with potential career breaks extending to five or six years in the case of multiple births—effectively reinforcing a traditional male-breadwinner model during early childhood (Makay, 2023). Recent findings underscore this pattern: Only 10% of mothers were employed when their child was one year old, and 77% remained out of the labour force by the child's second birthday (Ökrös & Makay, 2024).

Women's rising levels of educational attainment, alongside their growing motivation for labour market participation and career development, may contribute to a rethinking and restructuring of the division of domestic and childcare responsibilities. This shift has the potential to foster greater paternal involvement in family life, including the emergence of involved fatherhood (Takács, 2020) and even stay-at-home fathering (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021).

However, data on the division of labour between partners in Hungary indicate that even when women's labour market participation is high, they continue to bear a significantly larger share of household responsibilities (Bukodi, 2005; Gregor & Kováts, 2019). This imbalance tends to intensify with the arrival of children, and is closely linked to the number and age of the children (Veroszta et al., 2022).

Based on Murinkó (2014), we can assess Hungary's situation regarding gender- and family-related attitudes in comparison with other European countries. The study examines six countries (Germany, France, Norway, Poland, Romania, and Hungary) and their association with the division of child-rearing and caregiving tasks between men and women, using data from the international Generations and Gender Survey. Hungary differs from the other countries in that childbearing and the ideal of a two-parent family are considered very important, the child's interests are prioritized over paid work, and gender inequalities between men and women are more readily accepted. Nevertheless, in all countries, the majority of childcare tasks are carried out by mothers, and in Hungary, women's workload can be considered average.

3. Research Question and Hypotheses

The overview of previous studies has shown that the relationship between fathers' involvement in child-related tasks, their working patterns, and fathering attitudes is not straightforward. Our aim is therefore to disentangle this relationship and to answer the following research question: How do egalitarian gender role attitudes and paternal workload influence fathers' involvement in early childcare?

We set three hypotheses:

> H1: Fathers' workload significantly influences the number of child-related tasks they share with the mother. Both subjective work–family conflict and objectively measured long working hours are expected to reduce paternal task-sharing.
>
> H2: More egalitarian views on fathering roles—held by either the father or the mother—are associated with increased paternal involvement in child-related tasks. However, higher workloads are expected to moderate this effect, limiting the extent of task-sharing even among fathers with modern attitudes.
>
> H3: The associations of workload and gender-role attitudes with paternal involvement vary by time frame. Workload-related factors are expected to show a stronger relationship on weekdays, while attitudinal factors may be more salient on weekends, when fathers have greater flexibility to engage in caregiving.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Study Sample and Design

This study is based on data from the third wave of Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary data collection. Cohort '18 is a large-scale, longitudinal, nationwide, and multidisciplinary research program launched by the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute (Veroszta et al., 2020). Data collection began with

8,287 pregnant women at the second trimester of their pregnancy whose expected due dates fell between April 2018 and April 2019.

In the third wave of the study, a mixed-mode data collection strategy was employed, targeting two key respondent groups. Mothers were interviewed when their child was approximately 18 months old (n = 4,941), using either computer-assisted or paper-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI/PAPI), as well as self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Uniquely in this wave, the data collection was extended to include fathers. In defining "father," the study applied the concept of the social father rather than the biological one—that is, the male partner cohabiting with the mother and actively raising the child. Fathers not living with the child were excluded from the study population. Interviews with fathers were conducted approximately one month after the maternal interviews, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) by trained professional interviewers. Thus, data collection was carried out between October 2019 and December 2020, and despite the panel nature of the design, the data on fathers permit to study the topic only in a cross-sectional way. The number of responding fathers was n = 1,992.

The analytical database used in this study is based on the individual-level linkage of fathers' responses to those of their respective partners (i.e., the mothers). Matrix weighting was applied to the dataset, based on the educational attainment of both mothers and fathers as recorded in the prenatal wave of the study. After the treatment of missing values, our analysis includes the responses of 1,783 fathers. The questionnaire covered topics such as fathers' employment circumstances and workload, and their views on fatherhood and parental roles. It also assessed their involvement in childcare activities. The questions asked of fathers were similar to those included in the parallel survey conducted with mothers, enabling a comparison of the two groups' responses.

Although the father subsample used in this analysis was drawn from a longitudinal survey, the response rate among fathers was relatively low. Despite the application of statistical weighting, response bias thus remains a potential concern—specifically, that fathers who are more actively involved in childcare may have been more likely to participate in the study. The findings also reflect a single point in time. Consequently, the analysis does not capture longer-term developments or shifts in fathers' involvement and attitudes that may have occurred since the data were collected.

4.2. Ethics

Participation in the study was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research methodology adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration and the Code of Ethics of the Hungarian Psychological Association. The study was reviewed and approved by an independent ethics committee established for the Cohort '18 study (reference number 2022/1), which included professionals external to the research group.

4.3. Measures

4.3.1. Dependent Variable

The outcome variable measures how many of 10 child-related tasks were either performed solely by the father or shared with the mother. Respondents were asked to indicate who usually carries out various childcare tasks with their 18-month-old child on an average weekday and weekend. This question aimed to capture the division of childcare responsibilities within the household. For each activity, participants selected one of four response options reflecting the main caregiver: "Mostly the respondent"; "Shared equally or done together with partner"; "Mostly the partner"; "Always or usually someone else."

The activities included the following tasks:

1. Feeding;
2. Bathing;
3. Dressing;
4. Changing diapers;
5. Putting the child to bed;
6. Reassuring the child at night;
7. Singing, storytelling, or reciting rhymes;
8. Playing with the child;
9. Going for walks or visiting the playground;
10. Taking or picking up the child from nursery or programs.

As a dependent variable, a task is coded as "shared" if the father reported either doing it mostly himself or performing it jointly with the mother. This categorization of fathers' involvement is not a strict definition, as it includes both tasks performed by the father alone and those carried out jointly with the mother.

4.3.2. Independent Variables

4.3.2.1. Work–Family Balance and Fathers' Workload

Two complementary approaches are used to assess the workload of fathers. First, we examine work–family balance by looking at levels of subjective work–family conflict, based on the extent to which work demands are perceived to interfere with family life. This is captured using two items commonly employed in cross-national surveys such as the Generations and Gender Survey (Gauthier et al., 2020; Szalma & Takács, 2017):

- "I have come home from work too tired to do the chores that need to be done."
- "It has been difficult for me to fulfil my family responsibilities because of the amount of time I spent on my job."

To measure work–family conflict, responses were categorized as follows:

- Very high conflict if the father responded "Several times a week" to either item;

- High conflict if the response to either item was “Several times a month”;
- Moderate conflict for responses of “Once or twice a month”;
- Low conflict if neither item had a valid response in the above categories, and the father answered “Never” to at least one item.

The distribution of work–family conflict levels across the sample is presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File. To validate the choice of our coding, we conducted robustness checks and ran the same models with a different (stricter) coding. The results confirm the consistency of our main finding and are shown in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File.

The second approach to measuring fathers’ workload relies on an objective indicator—the number of average weekly working hours—as self-reported by fathers in response to the question:

> “How many hours do you work in an average week, including overtime?”

In Hungary, the standard full-time workweek is 40 hours, and thus responses exceeding this threshold are treated as indicative of high time demands. Unlike work–family conflict, which captures subjective perceptions, this variable reflects actual time spent in paid employment.

The mean number of weekly working hours in the sample is 46.65 hours (SD = 10.03). Given the theoretical relevance of standard workweek thresholds and the potential for non-linear effects (see Section 4.4), we treated working hours as a categorical variable. Categories were defined as ≤ 40 hours, 41–50 hours, and > 50 hours per week. The distribution of these categories is presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File.

4.3.2.2. Attitudes Related to Fathers’ Role

In addition to workload, we account for both fathers’ and mothers’ attitudes toward the paternal role within the family. These attitudes were operationalized using four survey items that capture distinct dimensions of paternal responsibility:

- “A father is just as capable of caring for a young child as a mother.”
- “For a man, it is much more important to spend time with his family than to increase the family income by working extra hours at all costs.”
- “The most important decisions in the family should be made by the man.”
- “Earning a lot of money is the most important goal in a man’s life.”

Because these items reflect multiple dimensions rather than a single latent construct, we constructed two formative indexes—one for the father and one for the mother—following the approach outlined by Edwards and Bagozzi (2000). Respondents rated each item on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*); agreement with the first two items and disagreement with the last two items are used as a proxy for modernity. All items were reverse-coded where necessary, so that higher scores consistently indicate more modern attitudes toward paternal involvement. Then, the fathering index and the mother’s view of the father’s role were calculated as the unweighted mean of the four items. If a respondent was missing one item, the index

was computed using the average of the available responses. Respondents missing more than one item were excluded from the index construction.

The mean value of this "fathering index" is 3.04 (*SD* = 0.50) among fathers, and 3.23 (*SD* = 0.48) among mothers, indicating that, on average, fathers tend to express slightly more traditional views than mothers. The greater standard deviation among fathers suggests greater variability in their attitudes. Nevertheless, the interquartile ranges and medians of the two groups largely overlap, indicating similar central tendencies and response distributions.

4.3.3. Control Variables

We control for several indicators of the father's labor market position, including employment status and contract type, sector of employment, and whether he supervises subordinates. These variables allow us to take differences in occupational standing and workplace authority into account.

In addition, we include a set of demographic control variables: the father's age, highest level of education, total number of children, and whether he has children living apart from him. We also control for characteristics of the sampled child, specifically birth order (from the father's perspective) and the child's sex.

Finally, we incorporate maternal characteristics, including the mother's highest level of education and whether she is currently employed. Distributions for all variables are presented in Table 1 in Appendix 1 of the Supplementary File.

4.4. Statistical Analysis

Given that the dependent variable (the number of child-related tasks shared) is continuous, we employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models in Stata with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors to account for potential violations of the homoskedasticity assumption (Mooi et al., 2018). The results are presented as unstandardized regression coefficients (ß), which reflect the expected change in the number of shared tasks associated with a one-unit increase in continuous predictor variables and the difference in shared tasks relative to the reference category for categorical variables.

We estimated separate sets of models for two distinct time frames: weekdays and weekends, capturing variation in paternal involvement across the workweek. For each time frame, we estimate a sequence of models to progressively assess the effects of subjective workload, objective workload, and father-role attitudes as follows:

- Model 0 (model with no controls) assesses the unadjusted associations between our main predictors and the number of shared tasks. This model includes only work–family conflict, fathers' weekly working hours, and fathers' and mothers' fathering index.
- Model 1 examines the association between shared task levels and subjective work–family conflict, controlling for all background covariates.
- Model 2 introduces in addition the father's objective workload—measured by weekly working hours—while again controlling for covariates.

- Model 3 adds the two fathering indexes capturing attitudes toward paternal roles, based on responses from both the father and the mother.

This stepwise modelling strategy allows us to assess the independent and combined contributions of perceived conflict, actual time constraints, and father-role attitudes to paternal involvement in child-rearing.

We assessed potential multicollinearity among categorical predictors using chi-square tests and Cramér's V. All pairs of variables exhibited weak associations (Cramér's $V < 0.3$), suggesting that multicollinearity is unlikely to bias our regression results. For instance, while the association between fathers' work–family balance and working hours was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), the effect size was weak (Cramér's $V = 0.135$).

To further ensure robustness, we calculated variance inflation factors (VIF) for all predictors in the models, with all values below 2, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity. Additionally, likelihood-ratio tests demonstrated that excluding any variable significantly reduced model fit ($p < 0.05$), justifying the inclusion of all predictors.

We checked for nonlinearity for the three main predictors and the outcome variable. The relationship between work–family conflict and the number of shared tasks showed a linear but weak relationship, as well as that between fathering index and the number of shared tasks. Preliminary scatter plots suggested a weak and non-linear relationship between fathers' working hours and shared tasks. A likelihood-ratio test confirmed that the categorical specification improved model fit ($p < 0.05$).

We examined potential interaction effects between fathers' working hours and work–family balance and fathering index and working hours in Models 2 and 3. Neither of the interaction terms was significant, indicating that the effect of working hours on shared tasks does not depend on work–family balance, and the effect of the fathering index on shared tasks does not depend on the fathering index.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Results

The mean number of shared tasks as reported by the father is 6.2 on weekdays ($SD = 2.29$) and 7.8 on weekends ($SD = 1.76$), indicating a substantial increase in paternal involvement during the weekend. The higher standard deviation on weekdays suggests greater variability in fathers' involvement, potentially due to differing time constraints or workload demands during the week.

At both time frames, fathers' participation in caregiving is most pronounced in bathing their children, while their sole responsibility for other tasks remains limited (Figure 1).

Bathing is a well-defined task with a relatively fixed timing in families with young children, which may align with fathers' standard working hours ending at 5 or 6 p.m. This timing allows many fathers to return home in time to engage in this personal care task, making it a privileged moment for bonding with their infants.

Tasks involving leisure time, such as playing with the child, walking, and going to the playground, are predominantly shared on both weekdays and weekends, with shared involvement exceeding 94% for playing and 91% for walking or going to the playground on weekends. In contrast, routine tasks related to personal care—such as putting the child to sleep, feeding, and dressing—are predominantly carried out by mothers, particularly on weekdays. For example, mothers handle putting the child to sleep in 48% of cases on weekdays and feeding in 50% of cases. On weekends, some of these tasks, like bathing and putting the child to sleep, see a higher proportion of shared responsibility compared to weekdays. However, getting up at night to reassure the child remains primarily the mother's responsibility, especially on weekdays (60%).

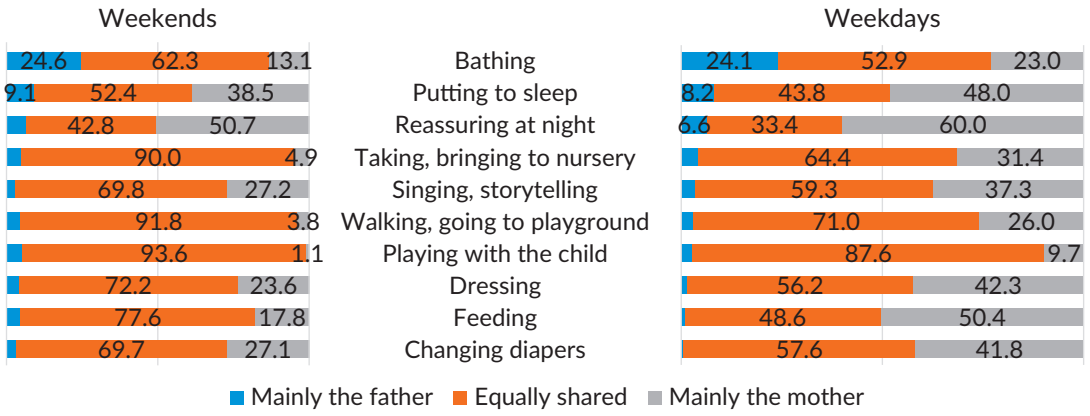


Figure 1. Distribution of child-related tasks on weekends and weekdays (%). Source: Own calculations based on data from Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary.

5.2. Results From the Regression Models

While we estimated an unadjusted model (Model 0, Table 1) to assess the raw associations between the main predictors and the number of shared tasks, we focus our interpretation on the models that include demographic and employment-related controls (Models 1–3). The coefficients in the adjusted models are more precise and substantively meaningful, as they account for potential confounding factors. Moreover, the stability, and, in some cases, the increased significance of the main predictors in the adjusted models underscores the robustness of our findings.

Model 1 (Table 1) thus presents the results of an OLS regression examining the influence of work–family conflict on the number of parenting tasks shared by fathers. Work–family conflict significantly affects the number of tasks fathers share, with notable differences between weekdays and weekends.

Results show that fathers experiencing very high work–family conflict share 0.77 fewer tasks on weekdays (ß = −0.767, $p < 0.001$) compared to those with moderate conflict, representing a 12% reduction relative to the average number of shared tasks on weekdays (6.2 tasks). On weekends, they share 0.83 fewer tasks (ß = −0.832, $p < 0.001$), corresponding to an 11% reduction relative to the average of 7.8 shared tasks on weekends. Fathers with high work–family conflict share 0.34 fewer tasks on weekdays (ß = −0.338, $p < 0.05$; a 5% reduction) and 0.33 fewer tasks on weekends (ß = −0.330, $p < 0.001$; a 4% reduction), compared to those with moderate conflict. Low work–family conflict is associated with an increase of 0.45 tasks on weekdays (ß = 0.447, $p < 0.001$; a 7% increase), but this effect is not statistically significant on weekends.

These findings suggest that higher levels of work–family conflict are consistently associated with lower paternal involvement, both on weekdays and weekends (confirming H1), with somewhat more pronounced effects observed during the weekdays.

While the coefficients for weekend task sharing are slightly larger in magnitude compared to weekdays, the proportional changes relative to the average number of tasks are more substantial on weekdays. This suggests that work–family conflict is more strongly associated with fathers' involvement during the weekdays, potentially due to the competing demands of work and family responsibilities during the workweek.

In Model 2 (Table 1), which includes fathers' weekly working hours, the significant effects of work–family conflict on shared tasks persist. This indicates that subjective work–family conflict influences paternal involvement independently of objective workload. Additionally, fathers working more than 50 hours per week share significantly fewer tasks on both weekdays (ß = −0.631, $p < 0.001$) and weekends (ß = −0.522, $p < 0.001$), representing a 10% reduction on weekdays and a 7% reduction on weekends compared to the reference group (40 hours or less). In contrast, fathers working between 41 and 50 hours per week do not differ significantly from the reference group in their number of shared tasks. These findings suggest that—in line with H1—both subjective work–family conflict and extensive working hours (over 50 hours per week) are important barriers to paternal involvement in childcare.

In Model 3 (Table 1), which includes both fathers' and mothers' views on paternal roles, the effects of work–family conflict and working hours on shared tasks remain consistent with previous models. Moreover, each one-unit increase in the fathering index is associated with sharing 0.66 more tasks on weekdays (ß = 0.658, $p < 0.001$), a 10.6% increase relative to the weekday mean of 6.2 tasks, and 0.39 more tasks on weekends (ß = 0.390, $p < 0.001$), a 5% increase relative to the weekend mean of 7.8 tasks. Similarly, each one-unit increase in the mother's fathering index is linked to sharing 0.31 more tasks on weekdays (ß = 0.307, $p < 0.01$) and 0.23 more tasks on weekends (ß = 0.233, $p < 0.01$), representing increases of 5% and 3%, respectively, thus confirming H2.

The negative effects of very high work–family conflict persist, with fathers sharing significantly fewer tasks on both weekdays (ß = −0.543, $p < 0.001$) and weekends (ß = −0.643, $p < 0.001$). However, the previously observed negative effect of high (but not very high) work–family conflict on weekdays is no longer statistically significant. Fathers working more than 50 hours per week continue to share fewer tasks on both weekdays (ß = −0.600, $p < 0.001$) and weekends (ß = −0.505, $p < 0.001$). Thus, while attitudes toward fatherhood are important, structural factors such as work–family conflict and long working hours continue to independently influence paternal involvement.

5.3. Background Variables

Several background variables are significantly associated with the number of shared tasks, revealing some interesting patterns (Model 3, Table 1). Fathers who supervise subordinates at work are more likely to share tasks on both weekdays (ß = 0.390, $p < 0.001$) and weekends (ß = 0.263, $p < 0.001$). However, fathers' employment status and sector do not significantly influence task sharing. Therefore, demographic background variables seem to be more important than employment-related ones.

Table 1. OLS regression results: fathers' involvement in childcare tasks (weekdays and weekends, unstandardized ß).

		Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends
Work–family conflict (ref. Moderate)	Very high	−0.576*** (0.184)	−0.696*** (0.148)	−0.767*** (0.180)	−0.832*** (0.149)	−0.638*** (0.184)	−0.702*** (0.152)	−0.543*** (0.184)	−0.643*** (0.149)
	High	−0.274* (0.163)	−0.246** (0.116)	−0.338** (0.165)	−0.330*** (0.115)	−0.289* (0.165)	−0.281** (0.113)	−0.241 (0.163)	−0.252** (0.114)
	Low	0.423*** (0.163)	0.00825 (0.122)	0.447*** (0.164)	−0.00370 (0.120)	0.444*** (0.162)	0.0106 (0.119)	0.367** (0.161)	−0.0366 (0.119)
Fathers' weekly working hours (ref. 40h or less)	41–45 hours	−0.266 (0.175)	0.0760 (0.121)			−0.166 (0.170)	0.116 (0.120)	−0.240 (0.170)	0.0701 (0.120)
	46–50 hours	−0.0106 (0.153)	−0.0268 (0.114)			−0.116 (0.155)	−0.0850 (0.112)	−0.113 (0.152)	−0.0830 (0.112)
	51+ hours	−0.494*** (0.172)	−0.431*** (0.140)			−0.631*** (0.179)	−0.522*** (0.144)	−0.600*** (0.173)	−0.505*** (0.141)
Fathers' fathering index		0.550*** (0.116)	0.301*** (0.1000)					0.658*** (0.116)	0.390*** (0.0969)
Mothers' fathering index		0.198 (0.132)	0.133 (0.0964)					0.307** (0.131)	0.233** (0.0952)
Fathers' employment status (ref. Employed)	Other			−0.347* (0.197)	−0.170 (0.153)	−0.307 (0.196)	−0.130 (0.151)	−0.246 (0.191)	−0.0872 (0.149)
Fathers' sector of employment (ref. Private)	Other			0.117 (0.149)	−0.0332 (0.119)	0.120 (0.146)	−0.0175 (0.117)	0.0969 (0.143)	−0.0319 (0.116)
Father has subordinates (ref. No)	Yes			0.320*** (0.119)	0.217** (0.102)	0.361*** (0.120)	0.246** (0.102)	0.390*** (0.119)	0.263*** (0.100)
Fathers' age (ref. 30–39)	18–29			0.387** (0.183)	0.231* (0.140)	0.376** (0.182)	0.225 (0.138)	0.447** (0.180)	0.275** (0.137)
	40+			−0.205 (0.150)	−0.404*** (0.117)	−0.224 (0.148)	−0.419*** (0.116)	−0.226 (0.146)	−0.419*** (0.115)

Table 1. (Cont.) OLS regression results: fathers' involvement in childcare tasks (weekdays and weekends, unstandardized ß).

		Model 0		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends	Weekdays	Weekends
Fathers' education (ref. Medium)	Low			–0.0324	0.217*	0.0227	0.281**	0.0857	0.318***
				(0.149)	(0.119)	(0.150)	(0.118)	(0.151)	(0.118)
	High			–0.158	0.336***	–0.188	0.300***	–0.220	0.280***
				(0.143)	(0.106)	(0.142)	(0.106)	(0.140)	(0.104)
Child's birth order as for the father (ref. 1st child)	Higher-order birth			0.277**	0.0624	0.281**	0.0665	0.275**	0.0635
				(0.125)	(0.0984)	(0.124)	(0.0978)	(0.123)	(0.0973)
Sex of the child (ref. Boy)	Girl			–0.286**	0.0275	–0.271**	0.0319	–0.263**	0.0370
				(0.119)	(0.0909)	(0.118)	(0.0899)	(0.116)	(0.0889)
Other children outside of the household (father) (ref. No)	Yes			–0.523*	0.0156	–0.511*	0.0249	–0.487*	0.0413
				(0.270)	(0.188)	(0.264)	(0.185)	(0.249)	(0.179)
New childbirth since cohort child (ref. No)	Yes			–0.0269	0.409*	–0.0482	0.387*	–0.0236	0.403*
				(0.375)	(0.209)	(0.369)	(0.211)	(0.354)	(0.212)
Mothers' education (ref. Medium)	Low			0.195	–0.0487	0.161	–0.0779	0.302*	0.0136
				(0.184)	(0.143)	(0.183)	(0.142)	(0.182)	(0.139)
	High			–0.0279	–0.143	–0.0797	–0.195*	–0.131	–0.231**
				(0.139)	(0.106)	(0.139)	(0.107)	(0.138)	(0.106)
Mothers' activity (ref. Non-working)	Working			0.345*	–0.0857	0.395**	–0.0358	0.343*	–0.0750
				(0.186)	(0.175)	(0.186)	(0.174)	(0.183)	(0.170)
Constant		4.165***	6.789***	6.277***	7.950***	6.418***	8.009***	3.401***	6.055***
		(–0.549)	(–0.43)	(0.190)	(0.138)	(0.200)	(0.150)	(0.577)	(0.428)
Observations		1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,783
R-squared		0.059	0.052	0.059	0.058	0.069	0.072	0.094	0.089

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Source: Own calculations based on data from Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary.

Compared to fathers aged 30–39, younger fathers (aged 18–29) share around 7% more tasks than the average weekdays number on weekdays (ß = 0.447, $p < 0.05$) and around 3.5% more tasks on weekends (compared to the weekend average; ß = 0.275 $p < 0.05$) while in the case of fathers aged 40 and above a 5% decrease is visible relative to the weekend mean (ß = −0.419, $p < 0.001$).

Indeed, demographic characteristics influence fathers' involvement on weekdays and on weekends differently. Fathers are more involved on weekdays if they have higher-order children and are not first-time fathers (ß = 0.275, $p < 0.05$) but are less involved if the child is a girl (ß = −0.263, $p < 0.05$). Fathers with children outside the household are less involved on weekdays (ß = −0.487, $p < 0.1$). A new childbirth since the cohort child increases involvement on weekends (ß = 0.403, $p < 0.1$). Fathers whose partners are employed instead of being out of the labour force share more tasks on weekdays (ß = 0.343, $p < 0.1$) but not on weekends. On weekends, fathers with low (ß = 0.318, $p < 0.001$) and high education (ß = 0.280, $p < 0.001$) are more involved than those with a medium level, while those whose partners have high education are less involved (ß = −0.231, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that both individual characteristics and family dynamics play significant roles in determining paternal involvement in childcare tasks.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Discussion

Among Hungarian families raising a one-and-a-half-year-old child, fathers show overall low levels of involvement in parenting tasks compared to mothers. Child-related tasks remain primarily the mother's responsibility, with fathers more often positioned as helpers rather than as equal partners sharing both tasks and responsibilities (Bukodi, 2005; Gregor & Kováts, 2019). This pattern is particularly evident in the domain of routine physical care (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Roeters & Gracia, 2016)—bathing being a partial exception. In accordance with previous findings (e.g., Waldfogel, 2009), we also found that the examined fathers' involvement was somewhat higher in interactive or more playful forms of care. Our results have confirmed these patterns by showing in addition that weekend periods lead to a modest shift toward more shared childcare activities (7.8 shared tasks on weekends vs. 6.2 during weekdays); however, this does not result in equal task division and does not substantially reduce the mother's caregiving load.

Descriptive data revealed that Hungarian fathers of young children carry a considerable workload, with 21% working more than 50 hours per week and only 38% working no more than the standard 40 hours. From a subjective perspective, 16% of fathers report experiencing very high levels of work–family conflict, and an additional 31% report high levels. The results of the explanatory models confirmed H1, demonstrating that both fathers' workloads and the degree of work–family conflict negatively affect their participation in and sharing of child-related tasks.

The mean value of the four-item index measuring fathers' and mothers' attitudes toward the paternal role—ranging from traditional to egalitarian, thus from 1 to 4—is 3.04 (SD = 0.50) among fathers and 3.23 (SD = 0.48) among mothers. This confirms, on the one hand, a shift in value orientations toward more modern conceptions of fatherhood in Hungary (Murinkó, 2014). On the other hand, it shows that fathers, on average, hold slightly more traditional views than mothers, and the higher standard deviation among fathers suggests greater variability in their attitudes.

In line with H2, our explanatory models showed that, as in other countries, more egalitarian gender-role attitudes are associated with increased paternal involvement (Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Keizer, 2015). Moreover, the OLS regression results show that even a modest increase in egalitarian attitudes is associated with greater paternal involvement in daily caregiving tasks, particularly when fathers hold more modern views. The influence of maternal attitudes on fathering roles, though weaker, is also statistically significant. However, even when controlling for both fathers' and mothers' views on paternal roles, both objective and subjective working conditions continue to significantly influence paternal involvement. This suggests that these factors are independently linked to paternal involvement. On weekends, a similar pattern is observed, though the link with gender-role attitudes is less pronounced.

Several factors previously identified as predictors of paternal task sharing were also confirmed in the Hungarian sample. Fathers of daughters tend to participate less in child-related tasks (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Harris & Morgan, 1991; Rouyer et al., 2007), although this association is statistically significant only on weekdays. Fathers' education shows a polarized pattern: Higher levels of education are generally associated with greater involvement (Gracia & Ghysels, 2017; Naujoks, 2024), while lower-educated fathers also tend to participate more—but primarily on weekends, with no significant association observed on weekdays. Fathers' age also plays a significant role: Younger fathers and first-time fathers are more likely to engage in task sharing (Kuo et al., 2018; Yeh et al., 2021). They may be more egalitarian or have different expectations about parenting roles. Moreover, elder fathers' (aged above 40) participation is decreased during the weekend, suggesting that they might have less energy for childcare tasks on weekends.

In line with H3, our results indicate that the associations between workload and gender-role attitudes and paternal involvement vary across time frames (Yeh et al., 2021). While the coefficients from the OLS regression models indicate that previously significant predictors have relatively small magnitudes overall, they reveal consistent patterns. Most notably, the association between work–family conflict and paternal involvement appears more pronounced during weekdays, potentially due to the competing demands of work and family responsibilities during the workweek. Still, while long working hours (51+ hours per week) are associated with fewer shared tasks and with a slightly larger proportional reduction on weekdays (0.6 fewer tasks, or 10%), they also contribute to a reduction of involvement on weekends (0.5 fewer tasks, or 6%).

Contrary to expectations, the association between attitudes toward fathering roles and paternal involvement is stronger on weekdays than on weekends. While egalitarian attitudes (particularly those held by fathers) are associated with greater task sharing on weekdays (a 10.6% increase for each-unit increase in the father's index), the effect size is smaller on weekends (a 5% increase). For mothers' attitudes, the effect is even smaller, since each one-unit increase in the mother's index is associated with 0.31 more tasks on weekdays (5%) and 0.23 more tasks on weekends (3%). This suggests that egalitarian attitudes may be most consequential when fathers face time constraints and competing priorities, rather than during more flexible weekend periods. Weekdays may serve as a critical context where attitudes translate into behavior under pressure, while weekends—governed by stronger social norms of family time—may reduce the variability linked to individual attitudes.

6.2. Conclusion

The significance of the results of this study lies in its ability to disentangle the relative influence of gender-role attitudes and work-related constraints on paternal involvement in caregiving, considering that the caregiver and breadwinner role of the fathers collectively shape their paternal behaviour.

The analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which Hungarian fathers engage in early childcare. One of the most robust findings is that fathers' own attitudes toward their paternal role emerge as one of the strongest predictors of involvement in caregiving tasks. This underscores the importance of internalized norms in shaping caregiving behaviour, even when accounting for structural factors such as work–family conflict and working hours. Moreover, the study highlights the structural limits of these values: Even when egalitarian attitudes are present, high levels of work–family conflict and long working hours substantially hinder paternal engagement. Importantly, the results challenge the assumption that fathers can compensate for limited weekday involvement by increasing their participation on weekends, revealing instead that time constraints persist across the week.

The findings point to a broader conclusion: While the mindset of Hungarian families with very young children appears to be shifting toward more egalitarian values regarding the division of caregiving responsibilities, the heavy work-related burdens placed on fathers continue to reinforce traditional divisions of labor—ultimately keeping mothers disproportionately responsible for childcare within the household. Interventions that promote positive attitudes toward paternal involvement, reduce work–family conflict, and limit long working hours—particularly those exceeding 50 hours per week—could significantly enhance fathers' participation in childcare tasks. Policies supporting work–life balance, such as flexible working arrangements or reduced overtime, may be especially effective in achieving this goal.

6.3. Directions for Future Research

One promising avenue for future research lies in comparing maternal and paternal perceptions of father involvement. Such a comparison would allow for an assessment of whether fathers systematically overestimate their participation, a possibility that the current dataset is well positioned to examine. In addition, the data could be used to explore the potential gatekeeping role of mothers—i.e., the extent to which maternal behaviors and attitudes influence the degree of paternal task-sharing. This would allow for a clearer distinction between fathers acting as "helpers" versus true "sharers" in caregiving responsibilities.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the mothers and fathers for participating in the study. They are also grateful to the Hungarian health visitors for their part in the recruitment and data collection. Since the Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary study was carried out under the auspices of a large-scale scientific initiative by the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute, the Institute's research team and administrative co-workers are also to be thanked.

Funding

The Cohort ‘18 project is implemented within the framework of the EFOP Plusz-3.3.2-25-2025-00001—Strategic Developments in Social Inclusion Policy project, with the support of the European Union and co-financed by Hungary.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. Data can be requested at https://www.demografia.hu/en and may be analysed with the permission of the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute.

Supplementary Material

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

References

Allen, S. M., & Hawkins, A. J. (1999). Maternal gatekeeping: Mothers’ beliefs and behaviors that inhibit greater father involvement in family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *61*(1), 199–212. https://doi.org/10.2307/353894

Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Lotz, A., Alyousefi-van Dijk, K., & van IJzendoorn, M. (2019). Birth of a father: Fathering in the first 1,000 days. *Child Development Perspectives*, *13*(4), 247–253. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12347

Barclay, L., & Lupton, D. (1999). The experiences of new fatherhood: A socio-cultural analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *29*(4), 1013–1020. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1999.00978.x

Barnett, R. C., & Baruch, G. K. (1987). Determinants of fathers’ participation in family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *49*(1), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/352667

Bellavia, G. M., & Frone, M. K. (2005). Work-family conflict. In J. Barling, E. Kelloway, & M. Frone (Eds.), *Handbook of work stress* (pp. 113–148). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412975995.n6

Bianchi, S. M., & Milkie, M. A. (2010). Work and family research in the first decade of the 21st century. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *72*(3), 705–725. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00726.x

Bianchi, S. M., Milkie, M. A., Sayer, L. C., & Robinson, J. P. (2000). Is anyone doing the housework? Trends in the gender division of household labor. *Social Forces*, *79*(1), 191–228. https://doi.org/10.2307/2675569

Bukodi, E. (2005). Női munkavállalás és munkaidő-felhasználás. In I. G. Tóth (Ed.), *Szerepváltozások. Jelentés a nők és férfiak helyzetéről 2005* (pp. 15–43). TÁRKI; Ifjúsági, Családügyi, Szociális és Esélyegyenlőségi Minisztérium.

Bulanda, R. E. (2004). Paternal involvement with children: The influence of gender ideologies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*(1), 40–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2455.2004.00003.x

Cabrera, N., Fitzgerald, H. E., Bradley, R. H., & Roggman, L. (2014). The ecology of father-child relationships: An expanded model. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *6*(4), 336–354. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12054

Cabrera, N., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Bradley, R. H., Hofferth, S., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Fatherhood in the twenty-first century. *Child Development*, *71*(1), 127–136. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00126

Dermott, E. (2014). *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927069

Deutsch, F. M., & Gaunt, R. A. (2020). *Creating equality at home: How 25 couples around the world share housework and childcare*. Cambridge University Press.

Diniz, E., Brandão, T., Monteiro, L., & Veríssimo, M. (2021). Father involvement during early childhood: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *13*(1), 77–99. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12410

Doucet, A. (2013). Gender roles and fathering. In N. J. Carera & C. S. Tamis-Le Monda (Eds.), *Handbook of father involvement* (2nd ed., pp. 297–319). Routledge.

Edwards, J. R., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2000). On the nature and direction of relationships between constructs and measures. *Psychological Methods*, *5*(2), 155–174. https://doi.org/10.1037/1082-989X.5.2.155

Forsberg, L. (2007). Negotiating involved fatherhood: Household work, childcare and spending time with children. *NORMA*, *2*(2), 110–126.

Fox, G. L., & Bruce, C. (2001). Conditional fatherhood: Identity theory and parental investment theory as alternative sources of explanation of fathering. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*(2), 394–403. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00394.x

Frank, K., & Frenette, M. (2021). *Couples' perceptions of the division of household and child care tasks: Are there differences between sociodemographic groups?* Statistics Canada.

Fuwa, M. (2004). Macro-level gender inequality and the division of household labor in 22 countries. *American Sociological Review*, *69*(6), 751–767. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900601

Gauthier, A. H., Liefbroer, A., Ajzen, I., Aassve, A., Beets, G., Billari, F. C., Bühler, C., Bujard, M., Cabaco, S., Corijn, M., Désesquelles, A., Dommermuth, L., Dykstra, P., Emery, T., Fadel, L., Fokkema, T., Hansen, T., Hlebec, V., Hoem, J., . . . Vikat, A. (2020). *Generations and gender survey baseline questionnaire 3.1*. Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute. https://www.ggp-i.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BaselineQuestionnaire_3.1.pdf

Glauber, R., & Gozjolko, K. L. (2011). Do traditional fathers always work more? Gender ideology, race, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *73*(5), 1133–1148. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2011.00870.x

Gracia, P., & Ghysels, J. (2017). Educational inequalities in parental care time: Cross-national evidence from Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom. *Social Science Research*, *63*, 166–180. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.016

Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, *10*(1), 76–88. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1985.4277352

Gregor, A., & Kováts, E. (2019). Work–life: Balance? Tensions between care and paid work in the lives of Hungarian women. *Socio.hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, *9*, 91–115.

Grunow, D., Schulz, F., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (2012). What determines change in the division of housework over the course of marriage? *International Sociology*, *27*(3), 289–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580911423056

Hanlon, N. (2012). *Masculinities, care and equality: Identity and nurture in men's lives*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9781137264879

Harris, K. M., & Morgan, S. P. (1991). Fathers, sons, and daughters: Differential paternal involvement in parenting. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *53*(3), 531–544. https://doi.org/10.2307/352730

Henz, U. (2022). Couples' daily childcare schedules: Gendered patterns and variations. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *11*(1), 127–146. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674320X15979442575464

Hobson, B., & Fahlén, S. (2009). Competing scenarios for European fathers: Applying Sen's capabilities and agency framework to work–family balance. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *624*(1), 214–233. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334435

Hobson, B., Fahlén, S., & Takács, J. (2011). Agency and capabilities to achieve a work–life balance: A comparison of Sweden and Hungary. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *18*(2), 168–198. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr007

Kato-Wallace, J., Barker, G., Eads, M., & Levtov, R. (2014). Global pathways to men's caregiving: Mixed methods findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey and the Men Who Care study. *Global Public Health*, *9*(6), 706–722. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2014.921829

Keizer, R. (2015). Which men become involved fathers? The impact of men's own attitudes on paternal involvement in the Netherlands. *International Review of Sociology*, *25*(3), 359–372. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2015.1078531

Kuo, P. X., Volling, B. L., & Gonzalez, R. (2018). Gender role beliefs, work–family conflict, and father involvement after the birth of a second child. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *19*(2), 243–256. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000101

Lamb, M. E. (2000). The history of research on father involvement: An overview. *Marriage & Family Review*, *29*(2/3), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03

Lamb, M. E. (2004). *The role of the father in child development*. Wiley.

Makay, Z. (2015). Family support system—Childraising—Employment. In J. Monostori, P. Őri, & Z. Spéder (Eds.), *Demographic portrait of Hungary 2015* (pp. 57–74). Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. https://demografia.hu/en/publicationsonline/index.php/demographicportrait/article/view/885/647

Makay, Z. (2023). Paid parental leave reforms and mothers' employment in Austria, France and Hungary. *Comparative Population Studies*, *48*, 425–456. https://www.comparativepopulationstudies.de/index.php/CPoS/article/view/583

Makay, Z., & Spéder, Z. (2018). Fatherhood: Parenthood and family roles for man. In J. Monostori, P. Őri, & Z. Spéder (Eds.), *Demographic portrait of Hungary 2018* (pp. 67–84.) Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. https://www.demografia.hu/en/publicationsonline/index.php/demographicportrait/issue/view/364

McGinnity, F., & Russell, H. (2008). *Gender inequalities in time use: The distribution of caring, housework and employment among women and men in Ireland*. Economic and Social Research Institute. https://hdl.handle.net/10147/76678

Meil, G. (2014). European men's use of parental leave and their involvement in child care and housework. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *44*(5), 557–570. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.44.5.557

Milkie, M. A., Sayer, L. C., Nomaguchi, K., & Yan, H. X. (2025). Who's doing the housework and childcare in America now? Differential convergence in twenty-first-century gender gaps in home tasks. *Socius*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231251314667

Mooi, E., Sarstedt, M., & Mooi-Reci, I. (2018). *Market research: The process, data, and methods using Stata*. Springer. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-10-5218-7

Murinkó, L. (2014). A nemi szerepekkel és a családdal kapcsolatos attitűdök európai kitekintésben: Értékek és gyermekgondozás. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *24*, 67–101.

Naujoks, T. (2024). The division of housework and childcare from a dyadic perspective: Discrepancies between partners' reports across the transition to parenthood. *Demographic Research*, *51*, 927–964. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2024.51.30

Offer, S., & Kaplan, D. (2021). The "new father" between ideals and practices: New masculinity ideology,

gender role attitudes, and fathers' involvement in childcare. *Social Problems*, *68*(4), 986–1009. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spab015

Ökrös, F., & Makay, Z. (2024). Mothers' labour market entry after childbirth: The role of pre-pregnancy job characteristics and socio-demographic factors. *Demográfia*, *67*(2), 101–143. https://doi.org/10.21543/DEM.67.2.1

Parke, R. D. (1996). *Fatherhood*. Harvard University Press.

Planalp, E. M., & Braungart-Rieker, J. M. (2016). Determinants of father involvement with young children: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study—Birth cohort. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *30*(1), 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000156

Plantin, L. (2007). Different classes, different fathers? On fatherhood, economic conditions and class in Sweden. *Community, Work & Family*, *10*(1), 93–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800601110835

Reynolds, J. (2005). In the face of conflict: Work-life conflict and desired work hour adjustments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*(5), 1313–1331. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00219.x

Roeters, A., & Gracia, P. (2016). Child care time, parents' well-being, and gender: Evidence from the American Time Use Survey. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *25*(8), 2469–2479. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0416-7

Rouyer, V., Frascarolo, F., Zaouche-Gaudron, C., & Lavanchy, C. (2007). Fathers of girls, fathers of boys: Influence of child's gender on fathers' experience of, engagement in, and representations of paternity. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, *66*(4), 225–233. https://econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/10.1024/1421-0185.66.4.225

Spéder, Z. (2011). Ellentmondó elvárások között….Családi férfiszerepek, apaképek a mai Magyarországon. In I. Nagy & T. Pongrácz (Eds.), *Szerepváltozások. Jelentés a nők és férfiak helyzetéről 2011* (pp. 207–228). TÁRKI; Nemzeti Erőforrás Minisztérium.

Sullivan, O. (2021). The gender division of housework and child care. In N. F. Schneider & M. Kreyenfeld (Eds.), *Research handbook on the sociology of the family* (pp. 342–354). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/edcoll/9781788975537/9781788975537.00033.xml

Szalma, I., & Takács, J. (2017). How to measure fathering practices in a European comparison? In M. J. Breen (Ed.), *Values and identities in Europe* (pp. 228–248). Routledge.

Sztáray Kézdy, É., & Drjenovszky, Z. (2021). Hungarian stay-at-home fathers: A new alternative for family wellbeing. *Social Sciences*, *10*(6), Article 197. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10060197

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Testa, M. R. (2006). *Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe* (TNS Opinion & Social No. 253; Special Eurobarometer). European Commission. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/406

Veroszta, Z. (2023, January 23). Children and (unequal) sharing of housework between partners in Hungary. *N-IUSSP*. https://www.niussp.org/family-and-households/children-and-unequal-sharing-of-housework-between-partners-in-hungary

Veroszta, Z., Boros, J., Kapitány, B., Kopcsó, K., Leitheiser, F., Sándor, N. G., Szabó, L., & Spéder, Z. (2022). *Infancy in Hungary. Report on the Second Wave of Cohort '18—Growing Up in Hungary* (Working Papers on Population, Family and Welfare No. 40). Hungarian Demographic Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.21543/WP.2022.40

Veroszta, Z., Kopcsó, K., Boros, J., Kapitány, B., Szabó, L., & Spéder, Z. (2020). Tracking the development of children from foetal age: An introduction to Cohort '18 Growing Up in Hungary. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, *11*(4), 587–598. https://doi.org/10.1332/175795920X15901721270280

Waldfogel, J. (2009). *What children need*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044784

Wall, K., Aboim, S., & Marinho, S. (2007). Fatherhood, family and work in men's lives: Negotiating new and old masculinities. *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques*, *38*(2), 105–122. https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.470

Yeh, C. J., Ballard, S., Bian, H., Singh, A., Chung, C., Hwang, S. H., Moore, L., Samermit, P., & Thongsaeng, P. (2021). An exploratory cross-cultural study: Fathers' early involvement with infants. *Early Child Development and Care*, *191*(3), 373–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1621859

Yeung, W. J., Sandberg, J. F., Davis-Kean, P. E., & Hofferth, S. L. (2001). Children's time with fathers in intact families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*(1), 136–154. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00136.x

About the Authors

Zsuzsanna Makay (PhD) is a demographer and sociologist and has been a researcher at the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute since 2010. Her research covers fertility, reproductive health, and labour market issues, including work–life balance. She has been a leading researcher of the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP) in Hungary.

Zsuzsanna Veroszta (PhD) is a sociologist and has been a researcher at the HCSO Institute for Quantitative Population and Economic Research, Hungarian Demographic Research Institute since 2016. She currently works as a deputy director. Her research covers cohort studies, educational inequalities, and employability. She has been the leading researcher of the Cohort '18—Growing up in Hungary longitudinal research program.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10898
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10898

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Developments in Involved Fatherhood in Hungary: A Register Database Analysis

Júlia Galántai

Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Correspondence: Júlia Galántai (galantai.julia@tk.elte.hu)

Submitted: 2 July 2025 **Accepted:** 13 January 2026 **Published:** 4 March 2026

Issue: This article 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 study investigates developments in involved fatherhood in Hungary. Drawing on the concepts of involved fatherhood and caring masculinities and recent findings on Hungarian caring fathering practices, the analysis employs multinomial logistic regression to examine Hungarian register data from 2011 and 2022. The dependent variable distinguishes between three categories: GYES (childcare allowance paid at a fixed rate), GYED Extra (childcare benefit combined with employment), and GYED Home (childcare benefit without a work commitment). Independent variables include educational attainment, marital status, regional context, employment type, and household status. A key contribution of this study was the emergence of a new group: fathers who interrupt their paid employment to care for their child, demonstrating the pluralisation of paternal roles. The sample shows that the norms of caring fatherhood have differentiated: In addition to the classical role of head of the family, there is more space for forms of care independent of work. The analysis revealed that this form of care has been spreading in Hungarian society independently of other contextual variables (region and educational attainment). These results underscore the interaction between institutional policies and evolving norms, highlighting the diversification of fatherhood models in contemporary Hungarian society.

Keywords

involved fatherhood; gender norms; parental care; parental leave; register data; social policy

1. Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, increasingly emotion-based parenting practices have gained ground (Dermott, 2003), as the emotional bond between parents and children has become regarded as more

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

important. Compared to the figure of the emotionally distant, breadwinner father, a new image of fatherhood has become more prominent—a father who is emotionally connected to his children, cares for them, and spends increasing amounts of quality time with them. Regarding fatherhood practices, fathers' daily lives have become increasingly characterised by the provision of emotional support and care (Dermott, 2003; Drjenovszky & Sztáray Kézdy, 2025; Takács, 2020).

Some authors have drawn conceptual connections between hegemonic masculinity and the predominance of male breadwinners (Doucet, 2004; Thébaud, 2010), while others have suggested that fathers can express support for equal parenting while maintaining traditionally gendered patterns of division of labour (Doucet, 2004; Plantin et al., 2003). Others have argued that the figure of the father involved in childcare and childrearing neither supports nor challenges hegemonic masculinity and is, in fact, a new type of masculinity (Doucet, 2018).

To explore the Hungarian context of fatherhood, this article examines Hungarian fathers who take some form of parental leave. Given Hungary's traditional gender norms (Makay, 2018; Szalma, 2011) and its relatively long parental leave period, it is important to analyse the characteristics and changes in fathers' behaviour in choosing these benefits. Therefore, this study analyses data from the Hungarian register database for 2011 and 2022 to examine how fathers' behaviour regarding parental leave has evolved over time. The research aims of the article are (a) to identify Hungarian fathers based on the parental leave forms they take, (b) to identify, where applicable, the socio-demographic traits that define distinct groups of fathers, and (c) to assess how these traits have changed over the past decade.

2. Studies on Involved Fatherhood

Men's participation in childcare has increased in recent decades, as has their emotional investment in being good fathers, reflecting a shift toward a more nurturing form of fatherhood that involves active engagement in children's daily care (Doucet, 2004). These findings are based on time-use measurements (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2003) and research examining practices of fatherhood (Bianchi et al., 2006).

Interpretations of caring masculinity, which recognise it as a valuable and valid element of men's identity (Hanlon, 2012), have emphasised that men should become more emotionally available to their children. A new concept of intimate fatherhood (Dermott, 2003) emerged as intimacy and emotional closeness became key factors in the conceptualization of fatherhood practices.

On the other hand, Koslowski (2011) observed that a father's breadwinner role does not preclude active participation in childcare responsibilities. She emphasised that fathers who assume an active role in caregiving may be equally and simultaneously involved in paid labour and childcare. Considering the concepts of involved fatherhood and caring masculinity mentioned above, the following section outlines some characteristics of Hungarian fatherhood and its broader social contexts that may influence the behaviour of fathers who choose to take parental leave in Hungary. This includes the current social policy environment surrounding parental leave and gender norms that have shaped fatherhood over the last decade.

3. Recent Developments on Hungarian Fatherhood

Some Hungarian studies suggest (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Szalma, 2010) that Hungarian society has higher expectations of men to secure stable working conditions to fulfil their traditional role as the breadwinner in the household. Having children often propels men to strengthen their position in the labour market and develop their careers. Furthermore, employers may regard fathers with small children as committed and reliable employees (Szalma, 2011).

At the same time, Hungarian fathers are also often confronted with conflicting expectations regarding their primary responsibilities. As a survey has confirmed (Spéder, 2011), there is broad agreement among both men and women that men's most important task is to support their family financially and that being a father is one of life's most important and beautiful experiences (Spéder, 2011). According to the same survey, almost every fifth respondent stated that they would like to see fathers who are particularly family-oriented and who take an active part in childcare. Every fourth respondent considered a man who earns a substantial income and is career-oriented to be an ideal father type, while almost half of the respondents found these two aspects equally important (Spéder, 2011). In a subsequent study, the authors found that these trends had become even more pronounced in recent years (Makay & Spéder, 2018).

Similarly, a recent Hungarian longitudinal survey, which followed around N = 8,000 households from pregnancy to the postpartum period (Veroszta et al., 2022), also included responses from fathers: 63% of fathers thought that they could take care of their small child just as well as the mother, and only 7% believed that a father could not perform as well as a mother in this regard. This may be interpreted as a sign of a shift in Hungarian fathering values, as fathers increasingly see themselves as capable of fulfilling primary caregiver roles.

In recent years, several Hungarian studies have examined fatherhood in Hungary and the notion of caring, involved fathers (Drjenovszky & Sztáray Kézdy, 2025; Makay & Spéder, 2018; Takács, 2017, 2020; Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2023). Some focused on fathers who stayed at home with their child and received some parental leave benefits (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a); others focused on attitudes towards paternal responsibilities (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Murinkó, 2014), while others dealt with paternal roles (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Takács, 2017, 2020) or looked at experiences with the healthcare system in relation to fathers' roles in the family (Neményi & Takács, 2008). Some recent articles focused on the well-being of partners and their division of childcare and parental roles (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021b, 2023). More attention has also been paid to paternal caring relationships (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a), including the rejection of hegemonic masculinity and the development of a new image of the caring father who seeks a more profound and meaningful relationship with his child and envisions his relationship with his partner on egalitarian grounds.

In Hungary, Takács (2017, 2020) conducted studies focusing specifically on active, caring fatherhood and examining the relationship between changing social norms and fatherhood. The related interviews were conducted with fathers who regarded themselves as active caregivers. The narratives of these fathers mentioned different types and characteristics of care: physical presence, efforts to balance work and private life, and, most importantly, emotional closeness with their children. Regarding the traits of fathers in the past compared with their present-day counterparts, the increased presence of emotional care, closeness, and

intimacy with one's child (Dermott, 2003) constitutes the most significant difference (Takács, 2017). The mother's better position in the labour market relative to the father was identified as an advantage in terms of motivation for caring practices (Takács, 2017, 2020). In her analysis (Takács, 2017), she further explores the self-definition of fathers who actively care for their children and highlights that fathers define their role based on their memories of their fathers. Many also take a post-materialist approach to their role at home. Furthermore, in a subsequent analysis, Takács (2020) employs categories for narratives of caring Hungarian fathers to describe caregiving relationships in terms of caring father roles.

Sztáray Kézdy and Drjenovszky (2021a) identified fathers in the capital with higher levels of education who were willing to participate in their study. However, they also indicated that it was challenging to involve stay-at-home fathers with lower levels of education from small towns and villages (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a). Later, they distinguished between two groups of Hungarian stay-at-home fathers in their study: Members of the first group did not choose this role—remaining at home was a necessity connected to employment circumstances, such as unemployment; members of the second group made a conscious decision (Doucet, 2004) as they wished to spend more quality time with their children and dedicate more time to childrearing (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a).

In light of the above findings, this study aims to address the research gap regarding the number and characteristics of involved fathers in Hungary. The present study, therefore, examines fathers who chose to take some form of parental leave in 2011 and 2022.

4. The Contexts of Hungarian Fatherhood

4.1. The Hungarian Parental Leave Policy

In Hungary, there are several types of parental leave; some are tied to a parent's previous employment, while others are available to those with no work history. GYES (childcare allowance) is the low-income option paid at a fixed rate equal to the statutory minimum old-age pension, whereas GYED (childcare benefit) is equal to 70% of the applicant's previous earnings with an upper limit of twice the minimum wage (Makay, 2019; Makay et al., 2024). For GYED, the eligibility criterion is proof of 365 days of employment or self-employment within the two years preceding the application, and the benefit can be claimed until the child's second birthday (Herke & Szikra, 2024). In Hungary, all parents are entitled to financial support for the care of their children until they turn three. Both GYES and GYED are gender-neutral and can be claimed by either parent. Only one parent can apply for parental leave (for either the childcare allowance or the childcare benefit) at a time. Those who receive GYED, once it ends on the child's second birthday, may receive GYES until the child turns three. The GYED Extra package, introduced in 2014, allowed work without limitation after one year, and from 2016, after six months.

However, paternal caregiving remains less common in Hungary than in Nordic countries, where a specific type of parental leave is available only to fathers—the so-called "father month" or "father quota"—intended to incentivise fathers' participation in childrearing and caregiving (Duvander & Fahlén, 2025). In Scandinavian countries, it has been shown that the greater the state's compensation of parents' income during parental leave, the more likely fathers are to stay home with their child or to stay home for longer periods despite the loss of income from work. This is because men, who are usually the higher earners, cannot afford to take

longer parental leave, as this would lead to a significant drop in net household income (Duvander et al., 2022; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011).

According to the 2011 census data, 2.27% of parental leave was taken by fathers prior to the launch of GYED Extra; in 2022, their proportion was 7.21%. If we examine the fathers taking parental leave in relation to changes in the types of leave available in recent decades, we find that most growth (proportionally speaking) in leave-taking occurred with the childcare benefit. The number of fathers rose from 5.31% to 8.05% (Hungarian Statistical Office). The most significant factor in this substantial growth was the policy change in 2014, followed by another change in 2016, which made it possible to claim this benefit without any limit on working hours. This provides an example of how policies affect parents' decision-making processes. In this case, the behavioural patterns of parents who receive parental leave benefits while still working are more likely to be rooted in rational calculations about maximising household income, insofar as the father's salary is likely to be higher.

4.2. Perceptions on Hungarian Parental Roles

According to several international surveys, as well as surveys focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary is among the more conservative countries concerning perceptions of gender roles (Makay, 2018; Spéder, 2023; Szalma, 2014; Takács, 2008; Tóth, 1995). As shown in a previous study (Szalma & Takács, 2013), the global economic crisis shifted the population's perceptions of women's position in the labour market in a more egalitarian direction, and the same can be said for both men and women regarding perceptions of gender roles. A subsequent study based on the ESS survey from 2010 showed that men's perceptions of gender roles returned to the earlier, traditional level, while women's perceptions lagged behind, resulting in a growing gap between men's and women's perceptions of gender roles (Gregor, 2014).

Spéder (2023) used a decompositional method to examine the international survey database, ISSP over 25 years (1988–2013). This approach enabled the measurement of macro- and micro-level changes in Hungarian society related to gender and parenting roles. He found that at the micro level, there has been a liberal transition and a behavioural shift regarding cohabitation patterns and attitudes towards marriage. At the macro, or societal level, Spéder (2023) found that Hungarian society has undergone a process of retraditionalization in recent years. This indicates a discrepancy between individual and societal values regarding gender and parenting norms.

Overall, international data indicate that support for traditional parenting roles remains prevalent in Hungary (Makay & Spéder, 2018; Spéder, 2023; Szalma, 2011; Tóth, 1995). However, some economic and socio-political events may have shifted attitudes towards more egalitarian parenting roles (Szalma & Takács, 2013). Taken together, these findings highlight how institutional settings can reinforce or weaken traditional gender roles, as well as conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood.

5. Data and Methods

This study analyses data from the 2011 and 2022 Hungarian censuses to examine changes in fathers' uptake of parental leave over the past decade. The primary aim was to assess the shifting distribution of parental leave types among fathers and to explore their associated socio-demographic characteristics in 2011 and

2022. The datasets used for this analysis were provided by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH). Fathers identified as taking parental leave were classified based on the economic activity variable in the respective census databases. Males recorded as receiving either "parental leave allowance" or "parental leave benefit" were included in the analysis. Following prior literature (Doucet, 2009), fathers who combined part-time employment with parental leave were also considered, reflecting the dual roles of caregiving and labour market participation.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics fathers exhibit across the diverse categories of parental leave, a subsequent analysis was conducted. This analysis examined the socio-demographic characteristics of these fathers. To this end, a multinomial logistic regression was employed for both datasets for each year. Subsequently, the model's marginal effects were analysed, as these indicate the predicted probability of belonging to a category.

During the analysis, multinomial logistic regression models were run for each year, and marginal effects were analysed using separate interaction analyses for all independent variables. This subsequent analysis examined how factors such as marital status, place of residence, labour market type, household status, and educational attainment influence fathers' decisions to take parental leave across different groups in 2011 and 2022. Regions were classified into two categories, advantaged and disadvantaged, based on the NUTS 3 regional division and unemployment rates. To account for the low number of fathers on leave in some areas, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Counties were grouped as disadvantaged regions, while Budapest and Pest County were classified as advantaged regions.

Regarding the 2011 database, two categories were available for consideration: "fathers not working" and "fathers working." The former category comprised fathers who did not work during their parental leave, whereas the latter comprised fathers who continued to work. Regarding the 2022 database, three categories were available: fathers on parental leave with no prior employment history, defined as lacking 365 days of employment (or 128 days of self-employment) within the two years preceding the application (GYES), fathers on parental leave while working (GYED Extra), and fathers on parental leave receiving GYED, while not working at the time (GYED Home).

6. Results

The analysis of data on fathers who chose a form of parental leave in 2011 and 2022 (Table 1) shows not only changes in the number of fathers taking leave but also shifts in the types of leave selected. A notable change in parental leave patterns occurred from 2011 to 2022: In 2011, the most common type of parental leave was GYES, which applies to fathers with no prior work history in the previous two years. At that time, GYES was the most common form of parental leave among fathers, accounting for 85.29% of all parental leave types. This percentage dropped to 12.24% in 2022.

By 2022, there was a significant increase in fathers selecting GYED Extra. After the introduction of the GYED Extra package, the number of fathers choosing this leave type rose sharply. Initially, only 13.62% of fathers opted to work while on parental leave. By 2022, that number had risen to 81.33%, indicating a major shift in paternal leave-taking norms. This result reflects a notable shift in the sociodemographic characteristics of fathers on parental leave. For example, fewer fathers were taking leave without recent work experience.

At the same time, more fathers were choosing to take leave while continuing to work, perhaps indicating considerations related to household income rather than a strong commitment to caregiving roles.

A significant shift was also observed in parental leave use, with fathers choosing GYED while not engaged in paid employment. The term "GYED Home" will be used in the following analysis to refer to this group, which consists of fathers taking a leave of absence from the labour market to care for their children. Therefore, these fathers may be categorized as a new form of fatherhood, referred to as "involved fatherhood." This change is illustrated by the fact that while 1.08% of fathers took some form of leave to care for their children in 2011, this figure rose to 6.43% in 2022. This indicates that the idea of involved fatherhood has gained recognition, with a notable increase from 63 to 1,406 fathers over the past decade.

In subsequent stages of the analysis, the decision was made to exclude the GYED Home category from the 2011 study. This choice was driven by the fact that the number of fathers in this category was only 63, which compromised the model's reliability.

Table 1. Number and proportion of fathers on parental leave per type in 2011 and 2022.

Year	GYES	%	GYED and working	%	GYED Home	%	Total	%
2011	4 969	*85,29*	794	*13,62*	63	*1,08*	5 826	100%
2022	2 676	*12,24*	17 782	*81,33*	1 406	*6,43*	21 864	100%

In 2011, marginal effects indicated that non-working parental leave was predominant across all family statuses (Figure 1). The proportion of working fathers was low. In 2022, the probability of married fathers receiving GYED Extra (benefits while working) was remarkably high (88%). Among unmarried fathers, GYES (31.1%) exhibited a relatively high marginal effect compared to other marital categories. In comparison, GYED Home emerged as a new category with a relatively low rate of 7.7% among unmarried fathers; however, the probability of taking GYED Home was higher among widowed fathers (14.2%).

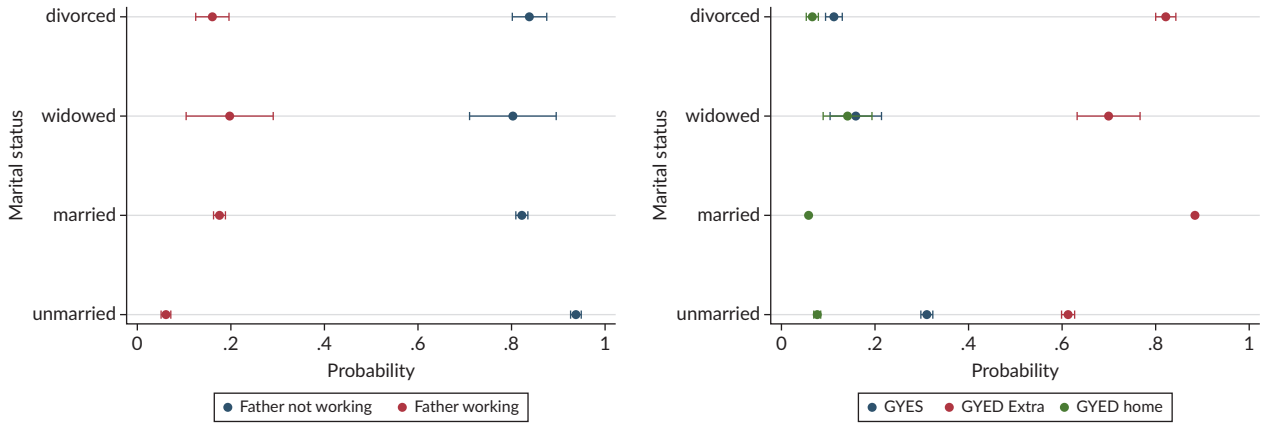


Figure 1. Marginal effects of fathers on parental leave and the variable marital status in 2011 and 2022. Note: The results for 2011 are on the left and results for 2022 are on the right.

A subsequent analysis of fathers' choice of parental leave categories by educational attainment reveals a slope already visible in 2011, based on marginal effects, indicating that the higher the fathers' educational attainment, the more likely they were to choose parental leave while working (Figure 2). Among fathers with

low levels of education, the "not working" category was the most prevalent for parental leave, with 97% of those with a primary education choosing this option. Among those with secondary education (78.3%), the proportion who withdrew from work decreased gradually. Among those with higher education, the proportion of care combined with work was the highest (27.3%); thus, fathers with higher levels of education were more likely to opt for the "father working" category.

In 2022, the distinction between forms of care became even more pronounced. Among fathers with low educational attainment, the proportion of taking GYES was higher than in other educational categories (26.0%). In comparison, GYED Home remained even across categories (10.7%). Among fathers with higher education, GYED Extra was the predominant option (93.1%), while the rates of GYES and GYED Home remained negligible (2.7% and 4.1%, respectively). In groups with secondary education (vocational school or secondary school), GYED Extra was predominant (73% and 88%), while GYES remained at 6% and 20%.

Overall, GYED Extra was a prevalent choice among fathers with higher levels of education. At the same time, those with lower levels of education were more likely to choose GYES than those in other educational categories, indicating a relationship with labour market outcomes. The stratification by educational attainment remained pronounced, reflecting differences in employment status and labour market opportunities.

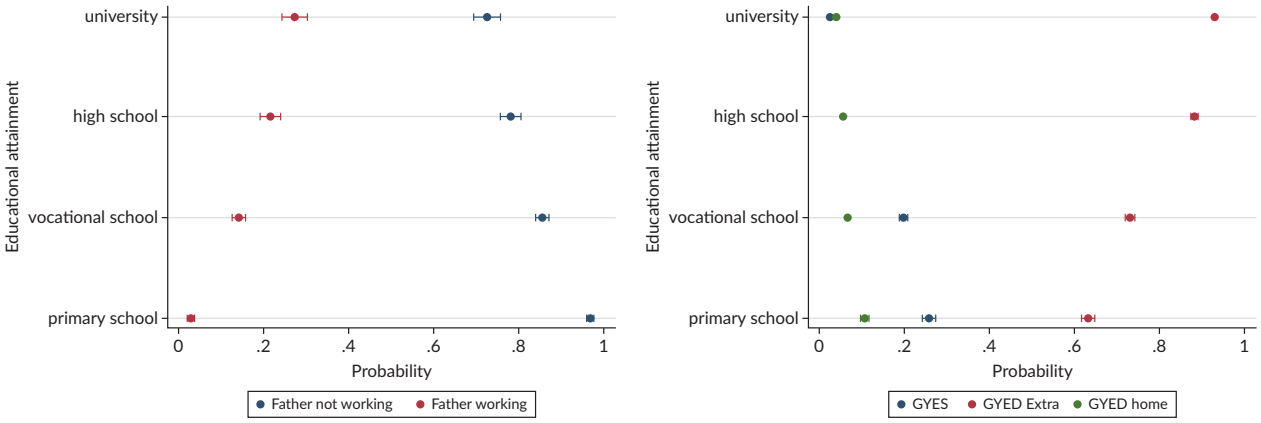


Figure 2. Marginal effects of fathers on parental leave and the variable educational attainment in 2011 and 2022. Note: The results for 2011 are on the left and results for 2022 are on the right.

An analysis of regional distributions reveals that in 2011, parental leave was predominantly associated with withdrawal from employment, particularly among fathers residing in disadvantaged regions (Figure 3). In advanced regions, the proportion of non-working fathers was 81.7%, while that of working fathers was 18.3%. In economically disadvantaged regions, the proportion of non-working fathers was significantly higher, at 92.5%, while only 7.5% were employed. This discrepancy may indicate the influence of local labour-market conditions, unemployment, and institutional or economic disadvantages on fathers' decisions. This result necessitates further investigation, ideally supplemented by qualitative interviews in future research.

By 2022, the distribution of parental leave forms had become more differentiated, but regional differences remained. In advanced regions, GYED Extra was the most prevalent (83.2%), while GYED Home was less common (6.4%). In economically disadvantaged regions, the proportion of GYED Extra (76.8%) declined, while the selection of GYES has increased from 10% to 16.2%.

This pattern suggests that in regions with greater economic resources, benefits combined with employment (GYED Extra) were more widespread. In contrast, in disadvantaged areas, the choice of GYES (childcare allowance paid at a fixed rate), which is independent of work, remained higher. Overall, regional disparities persisted, although they diminished over the past decade.

A further finding is that in 2022, the new GYED Home category showed similar proportions in both advanced and disadvantaged regions (6–7%), suggesting that this new form of care has spread regardless of regional differences among fathers.

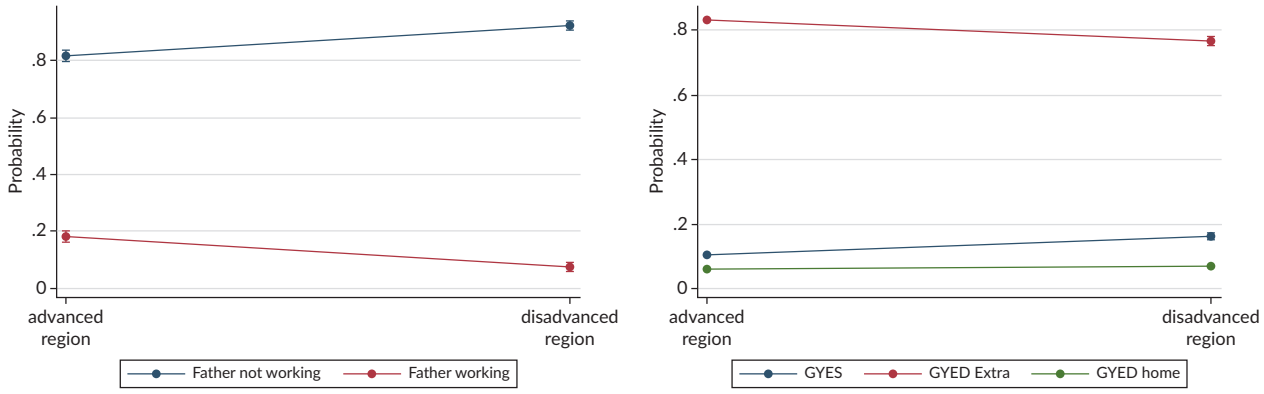


Figure 3. Marginal effects of fathers on parental leave and the variable region in 2011 and 2022. Note: The results for 2011 are on the left and results for 2022 are on the right.

Based on marginal effects, household status also played a significant role in fathers' decisions to take parental leave (Figure 4). In 2011, childcare alongside work was less common across all household statuses: among head-of-household fathers, the vast majority of care was not accompanied by work (86.1%), and among spouses of the head of household, the rate of complete withdrawal from work was even higher (90.9%). In the son-of-the-head-of-household category, almost all care was provided without work (94.6%). The proportion of non-working fathers was similarly high among other persons living with the head of household (85.4%). Among ascending relatives, parental leave without employment was practically 100%. This homogeneous pattern shows that in 2011, caregiving was strongly linked to withdrawal from the labour market.

By 2022, marked differences emerged by household status. Among head-of-household fathers, GYED Extra was dominant (88.3%), indicating a more traditional fatherhood role. The proportion of GYES was low (5.1%), and GYED Home was moderate (6.6%). Almost all fathers in the husband-of-the-head-of-household category were on GYES (99.5%), suggesting that the mother may be the household's breadwinner. A similar pattern was found among spouses of the head of household: the proportion of GYED Extra was low (6.2%), while GYES was exceptionally high (87.9%).

In the son-of-the-head-of-household category, the proportion of fathers receiving GYES was also high (65.4%), while the proportion receiving GYED Extra was lower (31%), and GYED Home was marginal. Among other persons living with the head of household, GYED Extra was dominant (81%), although GYES was also present (11.2%).

It can be concluded that in the spouse-of-the-head-of-household and husband-of-the-head-of-household categories, the proportion of fathers choosing GYES remained exceptionally high. This suggests that labour-market phenomena can influence not only the uptake of parental leave but also gender-role arrangements within households.

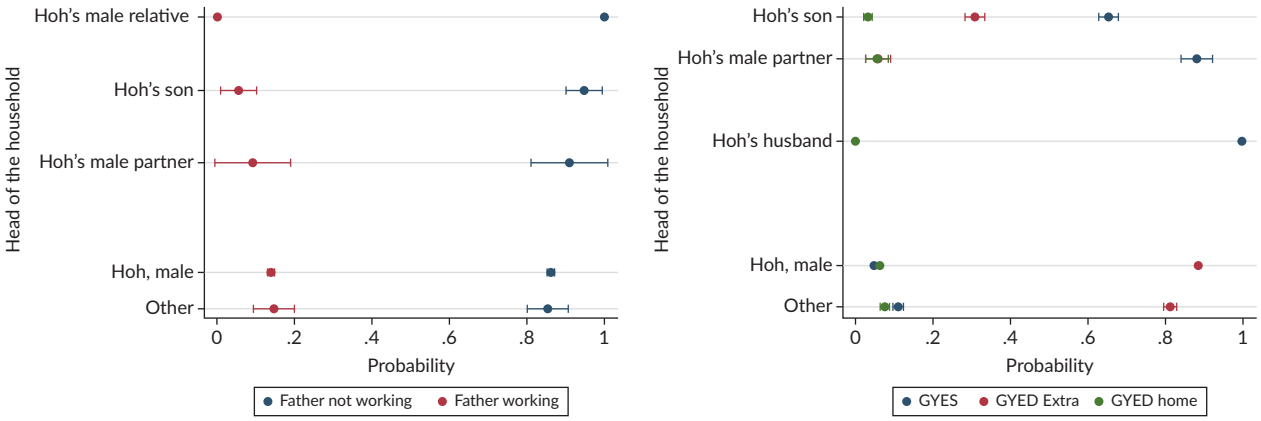


Figure 4. Marginal effects of fathers on parental leave and the variable head of the household in 2011 and 2022. Note: The results for 2011 are on the left and results for 2022 are on the right.

Marginal effects also indicate that labour-market type may influence parental leave arrangements (Figure 5). In 2011, parental leave was predominantly associated with complete withdrawal from employment, except for a few specific occupations: in the public work category, it meant almost complete withdrawal from work (99.8%). In the entrepreneur and casual worker groups, the proportion of parental leave taken while continuing to work was relatively higher (23–24%). The presence of working fathers was also measurable among employees (15%), but non-working fathers continued to dominate.

In 2022, differences according to labour market type became much more pronounced: GYED Extra dominated among employees (88.3%). In the public work group, the proportion of GYES remained higher than in other labour-market types (34.9%). Among contributing family members, GYED Home reached a high rate (36.7%), indicating that this group is particularly likely to choose full-time care without working. Further analysis is needed to explore this result. The high proportion of GYES among casual workers (18.2%)



Figure 5. Marginal effects of fathers on parental leave and the variable employment type in 2011 and 2022. Note: The results for 2011 are on the left and results for 2022 are on the right.

suggests that this may not reflect a preference for GYES, but rather that some were ineligible for GYED (70% of previous earnings, capped at twice the minimum wage) as they could not prove 365 days of employment (or 128 days of self-employment) within the two years preceding their application.

Overall, the results demonstrate that labour market type continued to have a significant impact on the distribution of parental leave categories among fathers.

7. Discussion

This study employed multinomial logistic regression on Hungarian register data from 2011 and 2022 to analyse a marked reconfiguration of paternal leave-taking in Hungary. In 2011, the majority of fathers accessed parental allowance, GYES, often within households where mothers assumed the breadwinner role, as low-educated fathers were excluded from the labour market. This indicated an erosion of the traditional male-breadwinner norm in Hungary, leading to changes within these households in a rather traditional society (Szalma, 2011; Szalma & Takács, 2013). The proportion of fathers on GYES among all fathers on parental leave declined from 85% to 12% by 2022; however, the characteristics of these households remained consistent, with breadwinner mothers and fathers excluded from the labour market remaining a stable pattern.

By 2022, after the introduction of GYED Extra (which combines benefits with paid employment), the uptake had surged to over 80% among all fathers on parental leave. Among fathers with higher education, GYED Extra became the predominant option (93.1%), and they were very likely to be head-of-household fathers (88.3%), indicating the dominance of a more traditional fatherhood role. This finding also reinforces the suggestion that GYED Extra was not typically based on involved fathering practices, with childcare responsibilities most likely falling upon the mother.

However, the most striking development in fathers' parental leave uptake was the emergence of the GYED Home group, comprising fathers who interrupt paid employment to provide full-time care for their children and to be involved in their early development. Their proportion among all fathers taking parental leave rose from 1% in 2011 to 6% in 2022. Another finding related to the new, emerging group of fathers—GYED Home—is that similar proportions of fathers opted for this kind of parental leave in both advanced and disadvantaged regions (6–7%), suggesting that this new form of care spread regardless of regional differences among fathers. This phenomenon is significant, as the emergence of involved fatherhood represents an ongoing process in most post-socialist countries (Suwada, 2015).

These findings align with international studies examining caring masculinities (Doucet, 2004; Hanlon, 2012). The results of this study demonstrate that in Hungary, a new form of fatherhood is emerging, characterised by fathers' willingness to temporarily postpone labour-market participation in their child's early childhood to be involved in their children's care and daily lives (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a; Takács, 2020). This phenomenon can be interpreted as reflecting a shift towards pluralised models of fatherhood (Plantin et al., 2003).

In contrast, the rapid expansion of GYED Extra seems to be driven less by egalitarian motives and more by the rational maximisation of household resources. Overall, while the increased uptake of GYED Extra underscores

ongoing economic considerations, the emergence of the involved fatherhood group indicates the weakening of the male breadwinner ideal. Furthermore, the rise of involved fathers marks a substantial shift towards the pluralisation of fathering norms in Hungary.

8. Conclusion

The present study contributes by using comprehensive register data to document the quantitative expansion of paternal leave in Hungary. Whereas previous research has focused mainly on qualitative samples (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a, 2023; Takács, 2017, 2020), this analysis demonstrates, at the micro level, that fathers are increasingly willing to interrupt paid employment to assume involved, full-time caregiving—a form of involved fatherhood. This finding extends Doucet's (2004) framework of caring masculinities by identifying a category of fathers emerging in Hungarian society, independent of contextual variables (such as regional differences and educational attainment).

In analysing the databases, another process was identified, demonstrating changes in parental leave uptake behaviour at the macro level, as observed in previous studies (Spéder, 2023). Following the introduction of GYED Extra in 2014, the number of fathers taking parental leave while continuing to work increased significantly. This suggests that these fathers prioritised the economic advantage of this benefit, aiming to maximise household income rather than taking on a more active fathering role. With this shift at the macro level, a new form of retraditionalisation (Spéder, 2023) has emerged alongside the continuation of traditional male breadwinner models (Makay, 2018), as evidenced by the uptake of the GYED Extra benefit.

A comparison of the two databases suggests that by 2022, new patterns of paternal roles had emerged (Doucet, 2004). The data also reflect a diversification of caring roles, with paternal roles becoming more varied and traditional patterns being replaced by new forms of caregiving (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021a; Takács, 2017, 2020). This pluralisation signifies a shift in the norms of caring fatherhood (Hanlon, 2012), which has become less dependent on traditional family statuses and offers men a range of socially accepted role models. The emergence of more involved fatherhood in Hungary demonstrates that the intensity and nature of care are becoming more diverse, representing an important step towards rebalancing role expectations between parents.

Future research should incorporate qualitative interviews, building on the findings of Takács (2017, 2020) and Drjenovszky and Sztáray Kézdy (2025). This approach would facilitate the exploration of the motivations and lived experiences that underpin these divergent trajectories. Additionally, it would enable an evaluation of their long-term implications for child development and couple well-being.

As a policy recommendation, the study's results indicate that eliminating work-hour restrictions under GYED Extra has not in itself promoted egalitarian caregiving. Economic rationality remains the dominant driver of mixed work-and-leave uptake. In order to establish authentic father-caregiver parity, a non-transferable "father quota" should be introduced. Setting a limit on working hours would also help to promote more involved fatherhood among those accessing GYED Extra. This should be complemented by outreach initiatives and employer incentives designed to normalise full-time paternal leave. Such measures, when combined with public campaigns, could build on the emergent pluralisation documented here and support more equitable family outcomes.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

This article has been prepared using datasets from the KSH, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (2011 and 2022 Censuses). The calculations contained in this document and the conclusions drawn from them are the sole intellectual property of the author, Júlia Galántai. The study used the following databases: Census 2011, 2022. The analysis was prepared by the author after access to the databases in the KSH-KRTK research room. The dataset in its current form is not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to review the manuscript for grammar and style. ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing and not for any other aspect of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

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

References

Bianchi, S. M., Robinson, J. P., & Milkie, M. A. (2006). *Changing rhythms of American family life*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Dermott, E. (2003). The 'intimate father': Defining paternal involvement. *Sociological Research Online*, *8*(4). https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.859

Doucet, A. (2004). "It's almost like I have a job, but I don't get paid": Fathers at home reconfiguring work, care, and masculinity. *Fathering*, *2*(3), 277–303. https://doi:10.3149/fth.0203.277

Doucet, A. (2009). Dad and baby in the first year: Gendered responsibilities and embodiment. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *624*(1), 78–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334069

Doucet, A. (2018). *Do men mother?* University of Toronto Press.

Drjenovszky, Z., & Sztáray Kézdy, É. (2025). Gyermekükkel otthon maradó apák: A családi dinamika és a szülő–gyermek kapcsolat alakulása. *Educatio*, *33*(4), 451–463. https://doi.org/10.1556/2063.33.2024.4.4

Duvander, A.-Z., & Fahlén, S. (2025). To take leave or not to take and how long to take? A study on Swedish fathers' parental leave use. *Journal of Family Issues*, *46*(6), 1050–1078. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X251329594

Duvander, A.-Z., Halldén, K., Koslowski, A., & Sjögren Lindquist, G. (2022). Income loss and leave taking: Increased financial benefits and fathers' parental leave use in Sweden. *Journal of Social Policy*, *53*(2), 551–571. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279422000514

Gershuny, J., & Sullivan, O. (2003). Time use, gender, and public policy regimes. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *10*(2), 205–228. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxg012

Gregor, A. (2014). *A nemi szerepekkel kapcsolatos attitűdök a 2000-es években Magyarországon* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. ELTE TáTK. https://doi.org/10.15476/ELTE.2014.124

Haas, L., & Rostgaard, T. (2011). Fathers' rights to paid parental leave in the Nordic countries: Consequences for the gendered division of leave. *Community, Work & Family*, *14*(2), 177–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2011.571398

Hanlon, N. (2012). *Masculinities, care and equality: Identity and nurture in men's lives*. Springer.

Herke, B., & Szikra, D. (2024). Nemek közötti egyenlőség Magyarországon európai összehasonlításban, 2015–2022. In I. Tóth, A. Gábos, & M. Medgyesi (Eds.), *Társadalmi Riport* 2024 (pp. 175–194). TÁRKI. https://real.mtak.hu/215991

Hook, J. L. (2006). Care in context: Men's unpaid work in 20 countries, 1965–2003. *American Sociological Review*, *71*(4), 639–660. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100406

Koslowski, A. (2011). Working fathers in Europe: earning and caring. *European Sociological Review*, *27*(2), 230–245. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq004

Makay, Z. (2018). Kisgyermekes anyák munkavállalása és az ezzel kapcsolatos vélemények változása Magyarországon. *Magyar Tudomány*, *179*(11), 1702–1716. https://doi.org/10.1556/2065.179.2018.11.11

Makay, Z. (2019). The family support system and female employment. In J. Monostori, P. Őri, & Z. Spéder (Eds.), *Demographic portrait of Hungary, 2018: Report on the conditions of the Hungarian population* (pp. 85–105). Hungarian Demographic Research Institute.

Makay, Z., Kapitány, B., & Ökrös, F. (2024). Családtámogatás, női munkavállalás. In J. Monostori (Ed.), *Demográfiai portré 2024* (pp. 77–95). Hungarian Demographic Research Institute.

Makay, Z., & Spéder, Z. (2018). Apaság: a férfiak gyermekvállalása és családi szerepei. In J. Monostori, P. Őri, & Z. Spéder (Eds.), *Demographic portrait of Hungary, 2018: Report on the conditions of the Hungarian population* (pp. 65–82). Hungarian Demographic Research Institute.

Murinkó, L. (2014). A nemi szerepekkel és a családdal kapcsolatos attitűdök európai kitekintésben: Értékek és gyermekgondozás. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *24*(1), 67–101.

Neményi, M., & Takács, J. (2008). Az apák családi szerepvállalása védőnői tapasztalatok tükrében. *Védőnő*, *18*(3), 31–36.

Plantin, L., Månsson, S., & Kearney, J. (2003). Talking and doing fatherhood: On fatherhood and masculinity in Sweden and England. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice About Men as Fathers*, *1*, 3–26. https://doi.org/10.3149/FTH.0101.3

Spéder, Z. (2011). Ellentmondó elvárások között… Családi férfiszerepek, apaképek a mai Magyarországon. In I. Nagy & T. Pongrácz (Eds.), *Szerepváltozások. Jelentés a nők és férfiak helyzetéről 2011* (pp. 207–228). TÁRKI—Nemzeti Erőforrás Minisztérium.

Spéder, Z. (2023). A quarter century of change in family and gender-role attitudes in Hungary. *Comparative Population Studies*, *48*, 741–770. https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2023-29

Suwada, K. (2015). Being a traditional dad or being more like a mum? Clashing models of fatherhood according to Swedish and Polish fathers. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *46*(4), 467–481. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.46.4.467

Szalma, I. (2010). Attidűdök a házasságról és a gyermekvállalásról. *Demográfia*, *53*(1), 38–66.

Szalma, I. (2011). *A munkaerő-piaci helyzet hatása az első tartós párkapcsolat kialakítására és a szülővé válásra Magyarországon* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem.

Szalma, I. (2014). A gyermekvállalás társadalmi normái és a mesterséges megtermékenyítéssel kapcsolatos attitűdök vizsgálata Magyarországon és Európában. *Replika*, *2014*(85/86), 35–55.

Szalma, I., & Takács, J. (2013). Should men have more rights…? Gender-role-related attitudes before and during the 2008 crisis. In G. Jónsson & K. Stefánsson (Eds.), Retrenchment or renewal? Welfare states in times of economic crisis (pp. 207–233). NordWel. https://real.mtak.hu/9784

Sztáray Kézdy, É., & Drjenovszky, Z. (2021a). Gondoskodásviszonyok a gyermekükkel otthon lévő apák családjaiban Magyarországon. *Socio.hu: Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, *11*(4), 138–161. https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2021.4.138

Sztáray Kézdy, É., & Drjenovszky, Z. (2021b). Hungarian stay-at-home fathers: A new alternative for family wellbeing. *Social Sciences*, *10*, Article 197. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10060197

Sztáray Kézdy, É., & Drjenovszky, Z. (2023). The distribution of unpaid domestic Work in Hungarian stay-at-home father—working-mother families. *Social Sciences*, *12*, Article 116. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030116

Takács, J. (2008). "Ha mosogatógép nem lenne, már elváltunk volna…"—Férfiak és nők otthoni munkamegosztása európai összehasonlításban. *Esély*, *20*(6), 51–73.

Takács, J. (2017). Aktívan törődő apák Magyarországon. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *27*(3), 104–126.

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Thébaud, S. (2010). Masculinity, bargaining, and breadwinning: Understanding men's housework in the cultural context of paid work. *Gender & Society*, *24*(3), 330–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432103691

Tóth, O. (1995). Attitűdváltozások a női munkavállalás megítélésében. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *1995*(1), 71–86.

Veroszta, Z., Boros, J., Kapitány, B., Kopcsó, K., Leitheiser, F., Sándor, N. G., Szabó, L., & Spéder, Z. (2022). Infancy in Hungary: Report on the second wave of cohort'18–Growing up in Hungary. *Working Papers on Population, Family and Welfare*, *2022*(40), 1–127.

About the Author



Júlia Galántai is a research fellow at the Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary. She defended her PhD at the Doctoral School of Sociology, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. She was a research fellow at the Institute for Analytical Sociology (IAS), Linköping University in Sweden. Her main research interests include the division of labour within the household, parenthood, social interactions, and natural language processing.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10845
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10845

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Changing Fatherhood: Social Differences in Parental Leave Uptake and Childcare Participation Among Bulgarian Men

Tatyana Kotzeva, Elitsa Dimitrova, and Kalina Ilieva

Institute for Population and Human Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria

Correspondence: Tatyana Kotzeva (tatyana.kotseva@iphs.bas.bg)

Submitted: 27 June 2025 **Accepted:** 15 December 2025 **Published:** 12 February 2026

Issue: This article 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 study investigates social disparities in the uptake of paid parental leave (PPL) and engagement in childcare by Bulgarian fathers within the context of shifting gender norms and recent policy reforms. Based on survey data from 503 fathers of young children, it examines attitudes toward involved fatherhood, motivations and obstacles to PPL use, and the interaction between gender stereotypes and socioeconomic conditions. Despite EU-aligned measures such as a two-month non-transferable paternal leave, uptake remains limited due to enduring male breadwinner expectations, income-related disincentives, and traditional caregiving models centered on mothers. Findings indicate a hybrid model of fatherhood: While maternal dominance in caregiving persists, a growing number of fathers, particularly those with higher education or remote work opportunities, are adopting more egalitarian roles. Logistic regression results highlight key predictors of PPL uptake, including the number of children, household income, and workplace flexibility. Moreover, PPL use of fathers correlates positively with egalitarian gender attitudes, implying that paternal leave functions as both a reflection and a catalyst of cultural transformation. Nonetheless, ambivalence endures among lower-income and less educated fathers, for whom caregiving often conflicts with masculine identity. Overall, the analysis underscores that although normative shifts are emerging, sustained progress requires comprehensive support through policy, workplace culture, and broader societal change to promote equitable parenting and normalize active fatherhood. The findings enrich ongoing discussions on gender equality, social inclusion, and evolving masculinities in post-socialist societies.

Keywords

Bulgaria; fatherhood; gender equality; gender roles; hybrid masculinity; paid parental leave (PPL); paternal involvement; work–life balance

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of fatherhood has evolved globally, from a traditionally distant provider role to one that emphasizes active emotional engagement and shared caregiving responsibilities:

> We believe men can lead more caring and meaningful lives and support gender equality by increasing their commitment to childcare and caregiving. Gender equality will only be achieved when men are taking on their fair share of the care work. (MenCare, n.d.)

This is the guiding principle of the global MenCare initiative, which promotes programs and media campaigns worldwide to encourage parents, especially men, to become more caring, involved, and equitable in family life.

Including fathers in early childcare is critically important—not only for the child's development, but also for the well-being of the mothers and fathers themselves. Research across disciplines—developmental psychology, pediatrics, sociology, and public health—demonstrates the positive impacts of paternal involvement during a child's early years for children's cognitive and language development (Cabrera et al., 2007; Jeong et al., 2016) as well as for their emotional and social growth (Downer et al., 2008; Puglisi et al., 2024).

Fathers who take part in early caregiving also contribute to improved mental health for both parents. Mothers report lower levels of postnatal depression and stress (Kasamatsu et al., 2021), and couples experience reduced conflict around household responsibilities (Allport et al., 2018; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011). Additionally, paternal involvement strengthens the father–child bond, fosters secure attachment, and enhances fathers' sensitivity to their children's needs (Brown et al., 2018; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018).

2. Conceptual Framing

The concepts of "caring masculinity" and "involved fatherhood" promote care, nurturing, and emotional engagement as valuable, rather than marginal traits. They challenge traditional gender roles and focus on the responsibility and presence of fathers in family life, contributing to more egalitarian family structures. "Caring masculinity" (Elliott, 2016; Scambor et al., 2014) is a broader concept that marks an identity shift and redefinition of traditional male roles. The idea of caring masculinity challenges hegemonic masculinity by promoting non-violent, emotionally engaged, and socially responsible ways of being a man. It is grounded in feminist ethics of care and critical studies on men and masculinities.

The concept of "involved fatherhood" mainly focuses on behavioral practices and presupposes active, hands-on, and nurturing engagement of fathers in their children's lives. After the foundational work of Lamb et al. (1987), which really set the framework with engagement, accessibility, and responsibility as the three dimensions of father involvement, there has been a steady stream of key theoretical, empirical, and review papers (Cabrera et al., 2000, 2018; Lamb, 2010; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Pleck, 2010).

The concept of "equal parenting" ("The Equal Parenting Project," 2023) is closely related to the above-mentioned concepts, and its emphasis is on fairly sharing parenting duties between partners and dividing responsibilities to avoid overburdening one parent (often the mother). Paid parental leave (PPL) is considered to serve as a powerful tool for promoting men's caregiving roles. By offering financial support

and job protection, it facilitates fathers' active participation in early childcare and fosters a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities. PPL has a positive impact on enhanced father engagement in caretaking (Huerta et al., 2013; Nordenmark, 2015; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Rostgaard & Lauste, 2015) and the development of parenting skills of fathers as active co-parents rather than supporting mothers (Rehel, 2013). PPL is a meaningful instrument for strengthening father–child relationships (Yang et al., 2022) and promoting gender equality and more equitable workplace dynamics (Doucet, 2021; O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

3. Aim and Research Questions

Based on the idea that fatherhood is understood as a multi-dimensional, relational, and context-dependent practice, shaped by cultural norms, family dynamics, and policy frameworks, this article aims to explore current practices and attitudes of fathers in Bulgaria concerning shared gender roles in childcare and PPL in the context of the recent changes in leave policies. The following research questions guide our analysis: What are the perceptions of fathers to incentives for more active involvement in leave uptake and childcare? What practices do fathers currently adopt in participation in childcare? Do gender stereotypes matter in the appreciation and uptake of PPL by fathers? What are the main differentiating factors among the different groups of fathers in PPL uptake?

The novelty of the current study on fatherhood and PPL can be assessed in the context of the limited research evidence available for Bulgaria. Recent Bulgarian research (Georgieva, 2022; Luleva, 2018; Nenova, 2017) points to emerging transformations in male identities, particularly among young middle-class fathers. These men increasingly integrate care, empathy, and relationality into their self-concepts while rejecting models of male dominance. Advocates of this shift emphasize the importance of inclusivity, intersectionality, and the practical application of caring values across family, workplace, and educational settings. Much of the Bulgaria-specific empirical information on men's participation in childcare comes from the national MenCare survey (Conkova & Ory, 2016; Ory, 2019; Stoyanova et al., 2014), as well as several qualitative/ethnographic studies (Dimova, 2010). None of these studies explores in detail the link between attitudes and practices of fathers and (non) uptake of PPL.

4. The Bulgarian Context

4.1. Leave Policies and Challenges of Equitable Parenting

In Bulgaria, parental leave policies provide women with up to 410 calendar days of paid leave, of which 45 days must be taken before the expected date of birth. The first six months of leave are reserved exclusively for mothers. From the sixth month until the child reaches two years of age, the remaining leave may be transferred to the father or a grandparent, but only with the mother's consent. During the first year, leave is compensated at a relatively high level, with income replacement of 90%, followed by a flat-rate benefit of €400 per month in the second year. Job protection upon return from leave is guaranteed by law (Dimitrova et al., 2025). Although the policy is formally gender-neutral in allowing fathers to take leave after the sixth month, in practice, leave-taking remains overwhelmingly concentrated among mothers and is widely referred to as "maternity leave."

The origins of this policy model lie in Bulgaria's socialist legacy. Between the 1950s and late 1980s, women had very high levels of full-time employment (85–90%), and the state supported working mothers through policies such as three months of maternity leave (pre-1986) and two years of leave (post-1986), along with a well-developed childcare infrastructure. However, this dual expectation—that women participate fully in both paid work and domestic care—led to what is known as the "double burden," with many women experiencing overload, stress, and dissatisfaction.

Following the collapse of socialism in the 1990s, economic instability pushed many women out of the workforce, and traditional family roles reemerged. Today, Bulgaria continues to reflect a familialism model (Javornik, 2016), in which caregiving is viewed primarily as a family—often maternal—responsibility. Although parental leave is long and relatively generous, access to public childcare for children under three is limited: Only 17–19% of children in this age group are enrolled in nurseries (National Statistical Institute, 2023).

Bulgaria, along with Romania and Lithuania, fits the caregiver parity model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012), a variant of the male breadwinner model. Although this model provides long and relatively well-compensated parental leave and formally allows fathers to take different types of paid parental leave, including transferred leave, caregiving responsibilities remain predominantly assigned to women. As a result, the model reinforces traditional gender roles by financially supporting mothers' withdrawal from paid employment.

4.2. Opportunities for Leave Uptake by Fathers and Involved Fatherhood

Under current legislation, mothers in Bulgaria can transfer parental leave to fathers or grandparents after the child's sixth month, up to the age of two. This provision, introduced in the late 1980s, has been underutilized. After Bulgaria's EU accession, a 15-day paid paternal leave for fathers immediately after childbirth was introduced in 2009. The shortest type of paid leave is compensated at 90% of a father's income.

In August 2022, following the EU Work–Life Balance Directive (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2019), Bulgaria adopted a new two-month non-transferable paid leave for fathers, which can be used at any time before the child turns eight. While this is a step forward, Bulgaria still lacks a "father's quota"—a designated, non-transferable portion of leave specifically reserved for fathers and structured to encourage meaningful engagement. Without this kind of incentive or a "use-it-or-lose-it" model, there is little structural motivation for fathers to take parental leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2015).

Data from the past decade show that paid leave uptake remains low. The 15-day paid paternal leave is the most commonly used, as this is taken by nearly one-third of fathers. Fewer than 1% of fathers make use of transferred parental leave from mothers—available after the child's sixth month—compensated at 90% of the father's income until the first year, and at a flat rate of €400 between the first and second year (Figure 1). The two-month paid paternal leave is used by about 2,000–3,500 fathers annually, but no stable trend can yet be observed, as data are only available from 2023 onward.

Studies from Northwestern European countries demonstrate that the introduction of a father's quota in parental leave policies significantly encourages fathers to take leave and contributes to shifting constructions of motherhood, fatherhood, and broader gender roles (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Salmi &

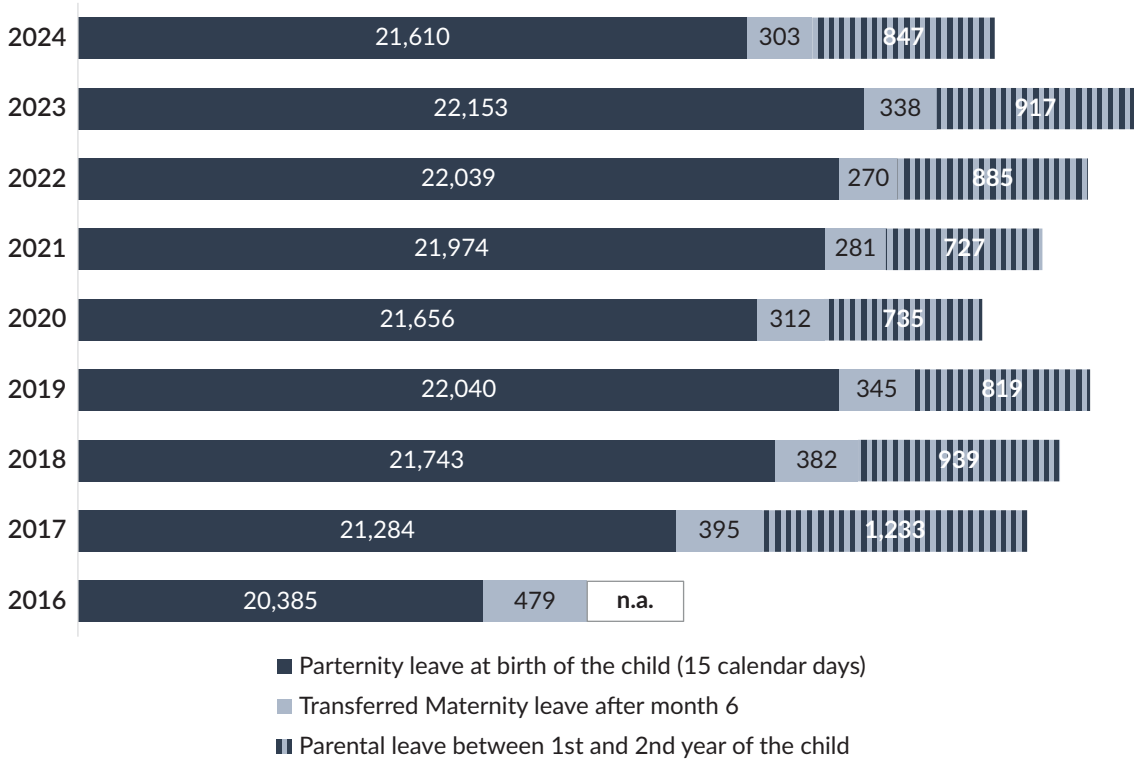


Figure 1. Number of fathers who took up the different types of leave. Source: Dobrotić et al. (2025).

Lammi-Taskula, 2015). Creating more opportunities for fathers to take dedicated time off for childcare also signals to employers and colleagues that fathers should prioritize caregiving responsibilities. Active involvement by fathers during paternity leave is a key mechanism for promoting gender equality and fostering norms of shared parenting (Mauerer, 2025).

In Bulgaria, the introduction of a two-month non-transferable paternity leave in August 2022 was a direct result of aligning Bulgarian labor legislation with European standards. According to Directive 2019/1158/EU, EU member states must ensure that each parent has an individual entitlement to at least four months of parental leave, with two of those months being non-transferable. The rationale behind the Bulgarian amendment to the Labor Code emphasized the father's individual right to leave, independent of the mother's decision, and aimed to improve work–life balance. However, the legislative motives did not reference goals such as advancing gender equality in childcare or enhancing emotional bonding and communication between fathers and their children in early childhood. This contrasts with the Nordic countries, where family policies promoting increased paternal leave uptake are grounded in gender-equality ideologies and a shared sense of child-rearing responsibility (Duvander & Johansson, 2015; Nordenmark, 2015).

5. The Survey: Sample Descriptives and Methods

The present study is part of the project "Parental Leave Policies and Practices in Bulgaria: A Study on the Attitudes of Parents and Employers to Parental Leave in the Context of Social Inequalities and Social Sustainability". The self-selected (voluntary response) sample comprises 1,536 mothers and 503 fathers of children aged up to eight who completed an online questionnaire. Data were collected using the

computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method, after sending email invitations to participants and reaching the targeted number of fully completed questionnaires. The questionnaire was developed by the project team, and some question batteries replicate those used in international surveys (e.g., Directorate-General for Communication, 2018), allowing for a comparative exploration of attitudinal trends regarding fathers' uptake of parental leave. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

For this analysis, we focus mainly on the data obtained from the questionnaire completed by fathers. The methods used in the present analysis include descriptive statistical analysis (cross-tabulations and Chi-square test of independence) and binary logistic regression analysis. Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (men sample, $N = 503$).

	Frequency	Percent
Age		
18–24 yrs	5	1.0
25–35 yrs	115	22.9
36–45 yrs	259	51.5
46–55 yrs	108	21.5
55+ yrs	16	3.2
Total	503	100
Number of children		
1 child	287	57.1
2 children	189	37.6
3+ children	27	5.4
Total	503	100
Partnership status		
Married	246	50.2
In cohabitation	212	43.3
No partner (single/separated/divorced/widowed)	32	6.5
Total	490	100
Place of residence		
Capital and 5 big cities	312	62.5
Big city (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants)	127	25.5
Small town	47	9.4
Village	13	2.6
Total	499	100
Father's ethnicity		
Bulgarian	488	7.4
Non-Bulgarian	13	2.6
Total	501	100

Table 1. (Cont.) Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (men sample, *N* = 503).

	Frequency	Percent
Father's education		
Secondary or lower	164	32.7
University/college degree	338	67.3
Total	502	100
Mother's employment at birth		
Employed	451	90.6
Economically inactive/unemployed	47	9.4
Total	498	100
Net monthly income of the household		
Below 767 euros	45	9.7
768–1278 euros	94	20.3
1279–1790 euros	124	26.7
1791–2301 euros	85	18.3
2302+ euros	116	25
Total	464	100
Father's use of parental leave		
No	329	65.4
Yes	174	34.6
Total	503	100

Nearly half of the respondents are aged between 36 and 45, the majority hold higher education degrees, most have one child, and most reside in the capital or a major city. Although incidental, the sample includes a relatively large number of fathers who have taken advantage of the transferable parental leave option, i.e., leave initially allocated to the mother but used by the father between the child's sixth month and second year. Specifically, 174 fathers (approximately 14% of the national annual average) reported having used this form of leave. This is a notable feature of the sample because transferable parental leave represents the longest period of paid paternal leave and is solely used by fathers, implying substantial and active involvement in child-rearing during the first two years. Overall, 34.6% of fathers in the sample have taken one or more of the three types of paid paternal leave , allowing for a meaningful comparison between leave users and non-users.

6. Results

6.1. Incentives to Encourage Fathers to Take Up PPL

As was stated above, under the current policy framework, the uptake of PPL by fathers is very limited. The survey aimed to explore the types of incentives that would motivate fathers to use it more and become more involved in childcare during the early years (Figure 2).

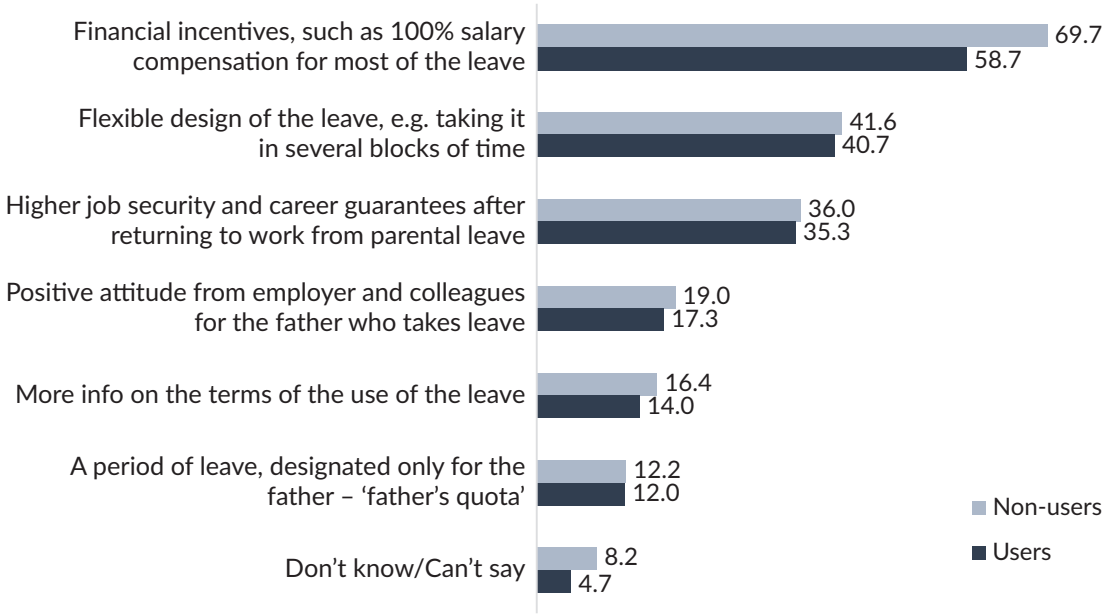


Figure 2. What are the most important incentives/motivations to encourage fathers to take up PPL? (up to 3 answers; men sample, *N* = 503).

The order of preference puts first "financial incentives," "flexible design of PPL," and "higher job security and career guarantees," all of which are based on concerns about the father's paid work performance. If PPL is to be taken by the father, its design should be different than the current one (used primarily by mothers). It should compensate for income loss in full, allow for non-prolonged absences from work to maintain contact with work, and enhance the guarantees for job security and career opportunities upon returning to work from leave. Underlined here is the importance of the father's role as the income provider in the family. The subgroup division between users and non-users of PPL does not reveal a different structure of opinions. Both groups prioritize the financial incentive; however, non-users emphasize its importance significantly more frequently. The lower importance of incentives such as disposing of a "father's quota in PPL" or "being well informed of one's rights to PPL" also indicates that the father's role as caregiver is thought of only in the second place after the breadwinning role.

6.2. Fathers' Perception of the Distribution of Childcare

The period around childbirth is crucial for structuring future childcare roles within the family, as these are still not firmly established and there is room for negotiating the traditional earner–carer asymmetry. Figure 3 shows the division of childcare chores within two years after childbirth as reported by the father.

The percentage of fathers who, without the involvement of the mother, do any of the listed childcare tasks is quite low (around 4–11%), with the exception of "taking the child to the nursery," which is done more often by the father in one out of five cases. The mother is still most often fully responsible for the child's immediate needs, like feeding, putting to sleep, changing clothes, and taking care when sick, including visits to doctors. However, there are also high percentages of predominantly shared tasks such as "bathing and hygiene," "games and walks," and "taking the child to the nursery." The picture is completed by chores like "changing diapers," "caring for the baby at night," and "searching for paid childcare outside home," which are split between being

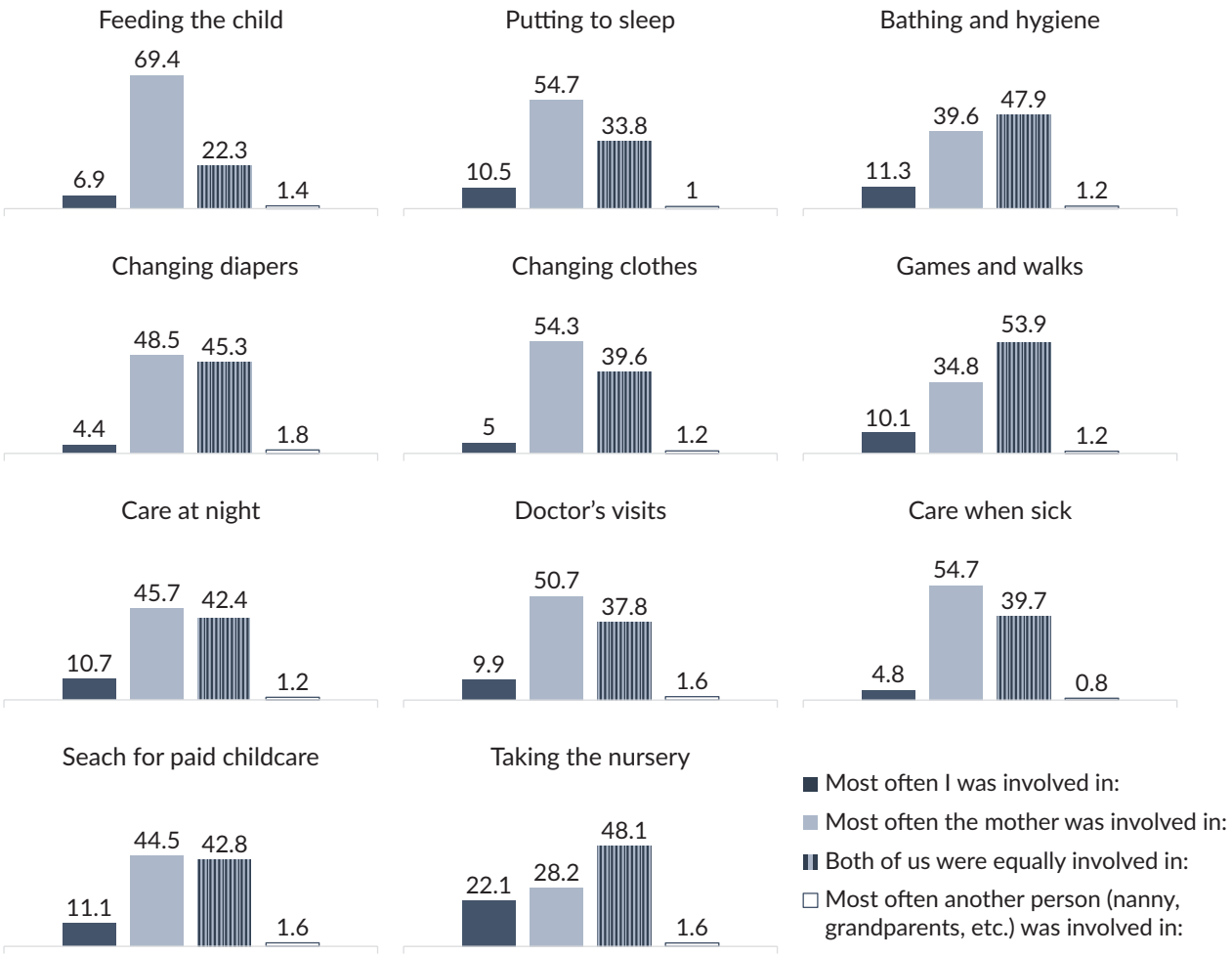


Figure 3. Within a couple, childcare roles during the first two years of a child (men sample, *N* = 503).

most often only the mother's responsibility and a shared responsibility of both parents. Thus, the day-to-day division of labor in childcare, as seen from the father's angle, is a combination of female-carer and dual-carer role models. Although few fathers in this sample identify as the primary caregiver, they report being more involved in childcare than would be expected under the traditional, fully segregated model of female carers and male breadwinners, and more so than has typically been the norm in past generations.

6.3. Fathers' and Mothers' Attitudes on PPL Sharing

The division of PPL between parents is considered a key factor in promoting sustained paternal involvement in childcare. However, the policy context in Bulgaria has long privileged maternity rights and continues to require that mothers consent to the transfer of their entitlements to fathers. In both the male and female surveys, a range of norms and attitudes opposing the equal sharing of PPL was tested to compare gender-specific views on openness to more equal parenting roles.

In Figure 4, we see that the reasons that appealed most to both fathers and mothers are a combination of social norms of motherhood mandate and economic considerations. Firstly, in fathers' views, mothers abide by the cultural norms to become the primary caregiver of a child under two. However, in mothers' views, the primary

reason for not sharing PPL is the economic one—couples cannot afford to reduce the income of both partners and typically choose the lower-paid parent—usually the mother—to take leave. The third reason stems again from gendered rights and roles—mothers maintain that it is their right to take the PPL. Interestingly, the next most frequently cited reasons by mothers reveal a degree of inconsistency in the mother's perceptions of the father's competence to care for a small child. Approximately one-third of mothers express skepticism in father's ability to take care of a newborn ("It will be difficult for the father to take care of a newborn baby, as well as to do the housework that mothers do easily"), whereas about one-quarter report willingness to share PPL with the father which indicates confidence in his capacity to be a primary caregiver. It is noteworthy that only 25.4% of fathers selected either the excluding category ("I disagree that mothers do not want to share their PPL") or the hesitant category ("Don't know"). Selecting one of these two categories automatically made all other options unavailable. This suggests that, for the remaining majority of respondents, mothers are perceived as contributing, for various reasons, to fathers' more peripheral role in childcare by limiting their access to PPL.

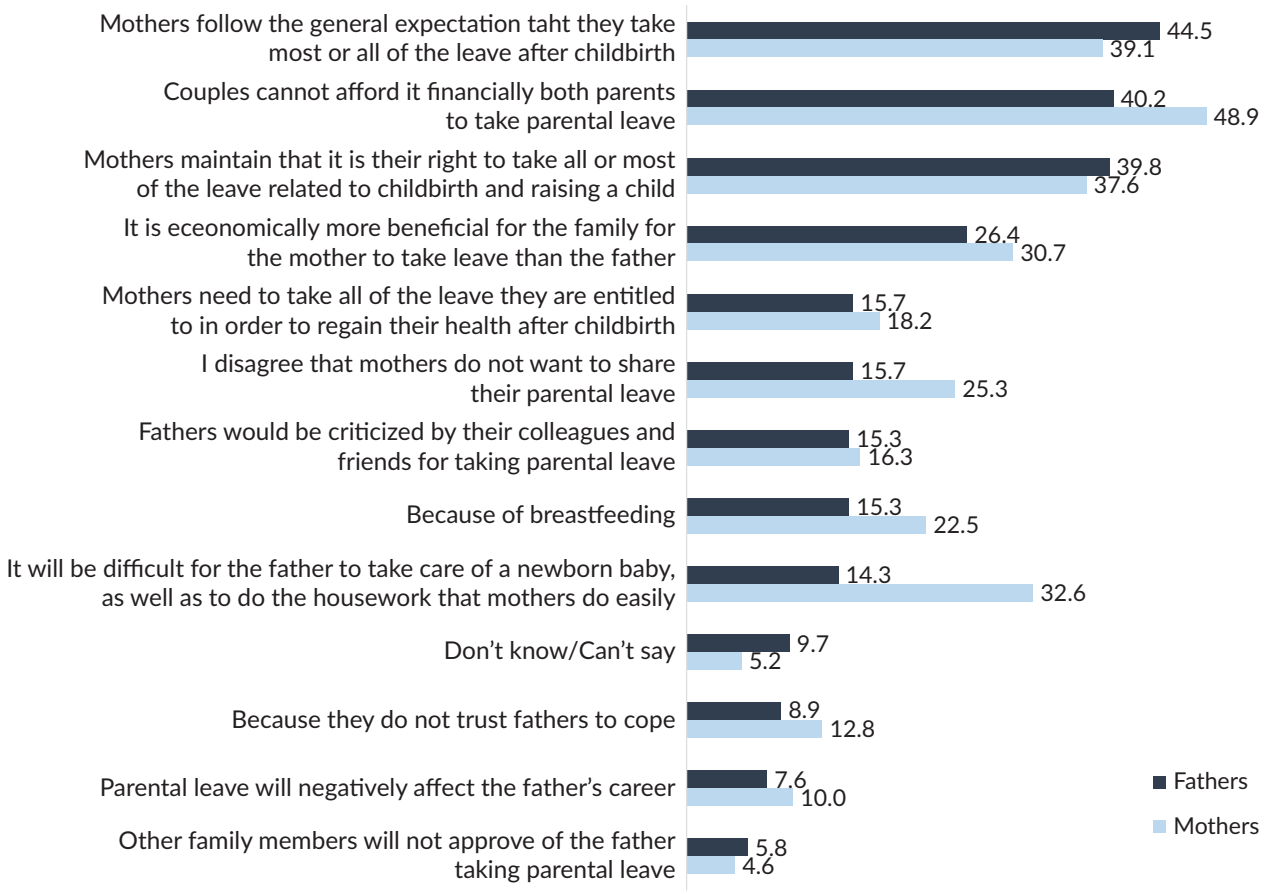


Figure 4. Graphic for the question: In your opinion, what is the reason why mothers do not want to share PPL with fathers? Notes: There were up to 5 answers; male sample, *N* = 503; female sample, *N* = 1,536.

6.4. Gender Roles Stereotypes

Fathers were asked to respond to 10 statements assessing their attitudes toward egalitarian versus traditional gender norms and roles (Figure 5). The statement that received the highest level of support—approved by 73% of respondents—was: "It is very important for the development of the baby/small child

that his father spends as much time with him as possible." This strong endorsement highlights contemporary fathers' growing awareness of the importance of their involvement in early child development and the quality of the father–child bond.

Men's active participation in household duties was also recognized as a key contributor to family well-being. Two-thirds of respondents (65.4%) agreed with the statement "Men should participate equally with women in household chores and childcare," while 68.2% supported the idea that "Families in which fathers actively help with household chores are more cohesive." These results indicate a significant shift toward shared domestic responsibilities and a more balanced view of gender roles in the family.

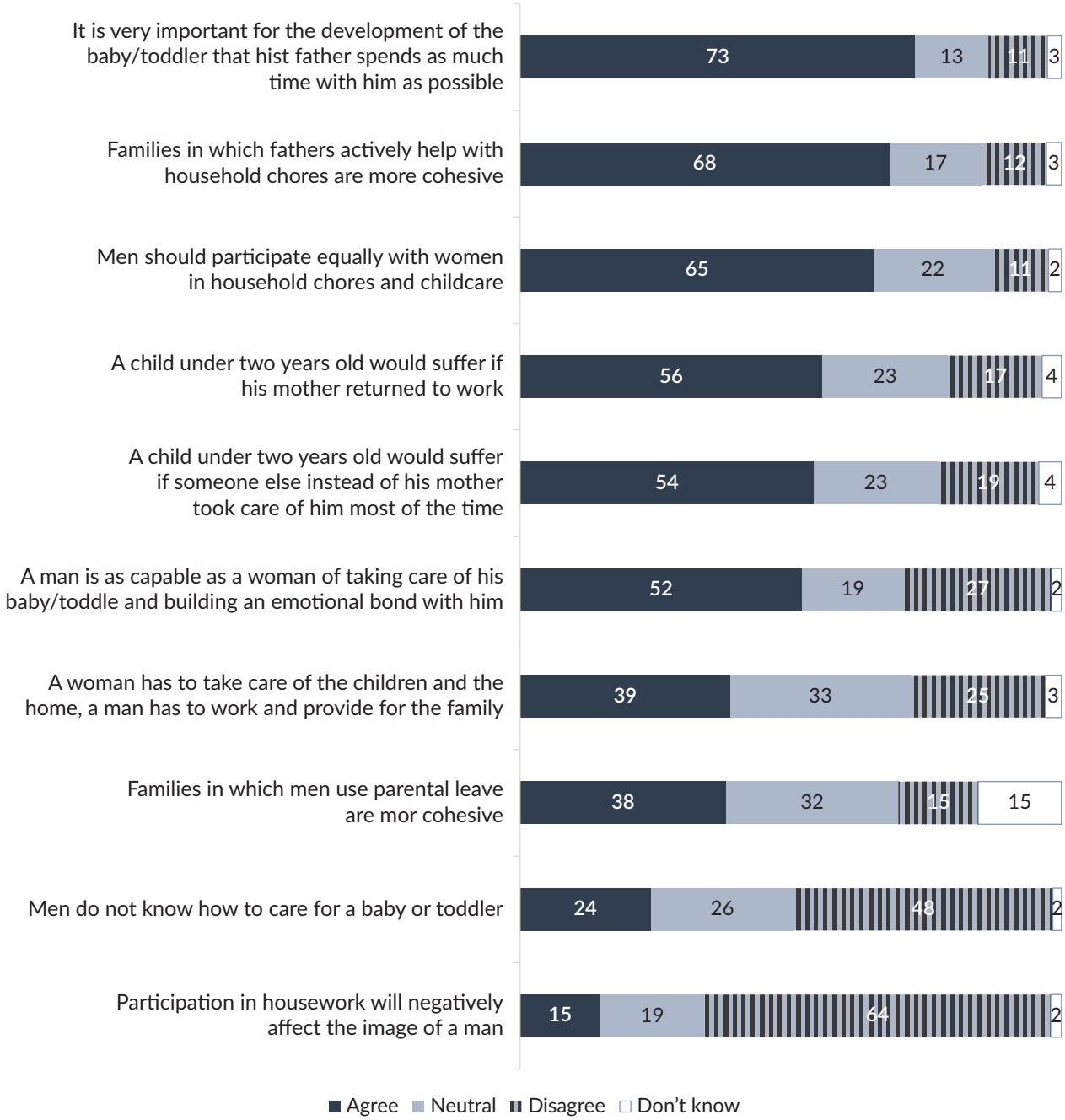


Figure 5. Men's views on gender stereotypes (men sample, *N* = 503).

In contrast, traditional gender norms received notably lower levels of support. Roughly 4 in 10 fathers (38.9%) agreed with the male breadwinner model, as expressed in the statement "A woman has to take care of the children and the home, a man has to work and provide for the family." Even fewer (14.9%) believed that "Participation in housework will negatively affect the image of a man," suggesting that the stigma surrounding men's involvement in domestic tasks is weakening.

However, ambivalence remains around the perceived value of paternal leave and men's parenting capabilities. Only 38.0% of fathers agreed that "Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive," reflecting skepticism about the positive impact of paternal leave on family dynamics. Moreover, while 52.1% of respondents affirmed that "A man is as capable as a woman of taking care of his baby/toddler and building an emotional bond with him," and 47.7% rejected the stereotype that "Men do not know how to care for a baby or toddler," conflicting attitudes persist. Over half of the respondents (55.8%) agreed that "A child under two years old would suffer if his mother returned to work," and 54.3% felt that "A child under two years old would suffer if someone else, instead of his mother, took care of him most of the time."

6.5. Social Differences in Fathers' PPL Use or Non-Use

Based on whether the father used PPL during the first or second year after the child's birth, we create a composite variable with two categories: fathers who used PPL and non-users (the dependent variable in the present analysis).

About the factors associated with the use of PPL by fathers, we test three groups of models. In the first model, we focus on the association between father's (non)use of PPL and sociodemographic characteristics: number of children (having one child vs. two or more children); father's and mother's education (secondary education or lower vs. college or university degree); place of residence (big city vs. small town or village), and average net monthly income of the household separated in two categories (below and above average sample income [1,789 Euro]). In the second model, we include a variable measuring the effect of attitudes towards the use of PPL by fathers. We use the statement "Parental leave is mainly for women/mothers" with a binary response option as an independent variable in the analysis. In the third model, we explore the association between the uptake of PPL by fathers and fathers who work from home in the first two years after the child was born.

As a next step in the analysis, we use logistic regression models in order to study gender stereotypes/attitudes towards involvement in childcare by fathers. The following statements measured of a 5-point Likert scale are dichotomized, combining the options (strongly) agree vs. neutral position (neither agree, nor disagree) and (strongly) disagree: "A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"; "It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"; "Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"; "Families in which men use parental leave are more connected."

For each statement, we apply two sets of models. At first we explore the association between attitudes about men's involvement in childcare and sociodemographic characteristics of fathers: age (18–45 and 46+ years); number of children (having one child vs. two or more children); education (secondary or lower education vs. college or university degree); place of residence (big city vs. small town or village); average net monthly income of the household separated in two categories (below and above average sample income); a binary variable of

father's (non)use of PPL. We also explore the interaction between fathers' education and the use of PPL in a second group of models.

6.5.1. Factors Associated With Fathers' (Non)Use of PPL

The results from the multivariate analysis of the factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the child was born are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the birth of the child (men sample).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Number of children						
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1	
2+ children	0.67	*	0.65	**	0.66	*
Place of residence						
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1	
Small town/village	0.73		0.74		0.75	
Mother's education						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.84		0.78		1.16	
Father's education						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.83		0.84		0.81	
Mother's employment status at birth						
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1	
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	1.31		1.16		1.16	
Average net monthly income of the household						
€0–€1,790 (ref.)	1		1		1	
€1,791+	0.69	*	0.69	*	0.71	
Parental leave is mainly for women/mothers						
No (ref.)			1		1	
Yes			0.24	***	0.26	***
Father works from home in the first two years after birth of the child						
No (ref.)					1	
Yes					1.99	**

Table 2. (Cont.) Factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after the birth of the child (men sample).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Constant	1.01		1.50		1.36	
N		453		453		453
Log likelihood		−284.71		−268.59		−266.07
Pseudo R^2		0.02		0.08		0.09

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Model 1, Table 2 shows that fathers with two or more children are less likely to use PPL than men with one child (reference group). High household income (above the average net monthly income for the sample) is associated with lower odds of PPL uptake by the fathers (reference category: household with net monthly income below the sample average).

Model 2, Table 2 reveals the same dependence concerning the number of children and the average net monthly income of the household. In addition, fathers who agreed with the statement that PPL is mainly for women/mothers are less likely to use it compared to men who disapprove of this statement (reference group).

Model 3, Table 2 adds the effect of work from home by fathers during the first or the second year after childbirth. The effect of the number of children remains significant. The variable measuring fathers' agreement with the statement that PPL is more for women/mothers also remains significant. However, the effect of household income becomes insignificant, while work from home shows a significant positive association with fathers' uptake of PPL.

In brief, the regression in Table 2 indicates that fathers with more egalitarian attitudes and access to remote work are more likely to use PPL, while those with multiple children or from higher-income households are less likely to do so.

6.5.2. Factors Associated With Stereotypes About the Use of PPL by Fathers

The next part of the analysis focuses on the associations between men's stereotypes/attitudes about the use of PPL and childcare. We examine stereotypes that have received higher positive approval (Table 3, Models 1a and 1b and Models 2a and 2b) and stereotypes/attitudes that have been supported by a smaller share of respondents (Table 3, Models 3a and 3b and Models 4a and 4b). We also investigate the relationship between fathers' education levels and the use of PPL, as well as the stereotypes/attitudes associated with PPL and childcare. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample, *N* = 503).

	"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 4a		Model 4b	
	Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Age																
18–45 yrs (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
46+ yrs	1.37		1.37		1.37		1.37		1.12		1.12		1.32		1.32	
Number of children																
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
2+ children	0.66	**	0.66	**	0.58	**	0.58	**	0.99		0.99		0.65	**	0.65	**
Father's education																
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1				1				1				1			
University or college degree	1.24				1.14				1.23				1.65	**		
Place of residence																
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
Small town/village	1.15		1.15		0.69		0.69		0.64	*	0.64	*	1.2		1.21	

Table 3. (Cont.) Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample, *N* = 503).

	"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 4a		Model 4b	
	Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Net effects		Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Net monthly income of the household																
€0–€1,790 (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
€1,791+	0.98		0.98		1.2		1.18		0.8		0.81		0.87		0.88	
Use of parental leave																
No (ref.)	1				1				1				1			
Yes	2.22	***			3	***			0.58	**			0.65	*		
Father's education*Use of parental leave																
Secondary or lower & not used parental leave (ref.)			1				1				1				1	
Secondary or lower & used parental leave			2.22	**			4.56	***			0.47	*			0.49	*

Table 3. (Cont.) Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about fathers' use of PPL (men sample, $N = 503$).

	"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more cohesive"			
	Model 1a Net effects		Model 1b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 2a Net effects		Model 2b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 3a Net effects		Model 3b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 4a Net effects		Model 4b Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Father's education*Use of parental leave																
University or college degree & not used parental leave			1.24				1.61				1.02				1.3	
University or college degree & used parental leave			2.75	**			3.83	***			0.66				0.98	
Constant	0.59	**	0.59	*	1.71	**	1.41		0.48	**	0.53	**	0.85		0.98	
N	452		452		449		449		453		453		386		386	
Log likelihood	−301.76		−301.76		−240.17		−239.24		−242.21		−241.99		−259.17		−259.17	
Pseudo R^2	0.04		0.04		0.06		0.07		0.02		0.02		0.03		0.03	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The first model (Model 1a, Table 3) explores the association between different sociodemographic characteristics of the fathers and their stereotypes/attitudes towards the statement "A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/small child and building an emotional bond with them." The results show that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement compared to fathers with one child (reference group). Men who used PPL are more likely to have a positive attitude about a man's capability to care for his baby/small child and build an emotional bond with them compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between father's education and the use of PPL (Model 1b, Table 3) shows that in both groups of men with secondary or lower education and with a college or university degree the use of PPL is associated with a positive attitude about a father's capability to care for a baby or a small child and to establish as warm and emotional bond with them as the mother.

The results presented in Model 2a (Table 3) show that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement "It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that their father spends as much time with them as possible" compared to men with one child (reference group). Fathers who used PPL are also more likely to support this statement compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL shows that the uptake of PPL is significantly associated with positive attitudes regarding the importance of the time spent with the child by the father for the development of a warm and emotional bond (Model 2b, Table 3).

The results in Model 3a, Table 3 show that fathers living in small residential places (small towns or villages) are less likely to agree with the statement "Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child" compared to the residents of the big cities (reference group). Fathers who used PPL are also less likely to agree with this statement compared to non-users (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL (Model 3b, Table 3) shows that having experience with PPL is associated with lower odds of men with secondary and lower education agreeing that men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child.

Model 4a, Table 3 shows that men with two or more children are less likely to agree with the statement "Families in which men use parental leave are more connected" compared to fathers with one child (reference group). Fathers with a university or college degree are also more likely to support this statement compared to men with secondary or lower education (reference group). Men who used PPL are less likely to agree about the positive influence of fathers' uptake of PPL on family cohesion compared to those who did not use it (reference group). The interaction between fathers' education and uptake of PPL shows that men with secondary and lower education who used PPL are less likely to agree that fathers' use of parental leave makes the family more connected (Model 4b, Table 3).

7. Discussion

The findings regarding motivations of fathers to take up PPL highlight three key factors: adequate financial compensation for income loss, flexible PPL arrangements, and stronger guarantees for job security and career protection. These preferences indicate that fathers continue to prioritize their role as primary earners, viewing any potential disruption to their employment or income as a significant barrier to taking up PPL. In contrast, softer incentives such as increased awareness of rights or the introduction of a "father's quota" rank much lower in importance. This may reflect a broader societal perception that fatherhood remains closely tied to financial provision, while caregiving is seen as secondary. These attitudes correspond to the results from the

Eurobarometer Work–Life Balance survey (Directorate-General for Communication, 2018), which suggests stability over time. The recent studies from Russia and other Central/Eastern European countries also point out that economic and cultural barriers are primary to father involvement (Bagirova et al., 2024), institutional design and social norms keep care roles limited for fathers (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023), and economic disincentives, cultural expectations, and employer attitudes discourage men (OECD, 2022).

Furthermore, the common belief that mothers are the primary caregivers and primary beneficiaries of PPL reinforces traditional gender norms and limits paternal involvement in childcare (Directorate-General for Communication, 2018; Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

Concerning gender division of care in the early years of the child, the findings show that mothers strongly affirm they are primary caregivers and are still largely responsible for essential, immediate care tasks such as feeding, putting the child to sleep, changing clothes, and caring for a sick child. Some tasks like bathing and hygiene, playing and walking, and taking the child to nursery are more commonly shared between partners. The data also demonstrate a hybrid model of caregiving, with a mix of traditional (female-carer) and more egalitarian (dual-carer) role models, when fathers show some engagement in childcare, though rarely as primary caregivers. This suggests that a gradual shift from traditional norms toward more balanced gender roles in parenting has happened: Compared to traditional male-breadwinner/female-carer models, fathers participating in the survey are more involved in childcare (as self-reported). Previous national data show that fathers are primarily involved in playing or spending time outdoors with their children; traditional views continued to be prevalent, as 66% of respondents in 2014 and 56% in 2021 agreed that fathers lack time or prioritize work over childcare (Eneva, 2022; Stoyanova et al., 2014). The findings on gender role stereotypes reveal a complex and evolving landscape of attitudes toward fatherhood among men participating in the survey. Given that Bulgaria ranks among the countries with a high prevalence of traditional gender stereotypes (Directorate-General for Communication, 2024), the present study suggests growing support for egalitarian views regarding paternal involvement and the sharing of household responsibilities. Fathers increasingly acknowledge the significance of their role in child development and family cohesion. However, persistent doubts about men's parenting competencies and the perceived irreplaceability of mothers in early childhood suggest that traditional norms continue to exert a strong influence. These ambivalent attitudes suggest that, while normative change is underway, it remains incomplete. Targeted policies, sustained public discourse, and workplace reforms that promote paternal involvement—particularly during the early years of a child's life—may be essential for accelerating this cultural shift and normalizing a more active, confident, and equal role for fathers within the family.

The results from the logistic models reveal important social differences in the practices of involved fatherhood related to men's uptake of PPL. Having more than one child is associated with a lower likelihood of fathers using PPL. This result demonstrates the effect of the increased financial need experienced by the "large" families (with more than one child) that may impose the necessity on one of the parents (mostly, the father) to continue working and securing the family income even when there are opportunities to take up PPL. On the other hand, the results also show that higher income is associated with a lower likelihood for men to use PPL. Concerns about income loss and insufficient replacement of the financial compensations received during PPL in the second year, strong work demands, and higher engagement at work of the fathers from affluent households may be a barrier for men to use PPL. Similar findings of existing studies emphasized the effect of income differences between the partners in the household (Ziegler & Bamieh,

2023), men's considerations related to finances when taking the decision to use the leave (Kaufman, 2017), preferences to use a short period of time off for using PPL among disadvantaged fathers due to financial concerns, jeopardy of job place, and family hardships (Pragg & Knoester, 2017), and the gap between salary and the statutory paternity leave in higher paying jobs (Sponton, 2023). On the other hand, the study also outlines specific contextual features of the PPL use in the Bulgarian context, which differ from countries where high-income fathers face less opportunity costs when taking up PPL (Marynissen et al., 2019; Périvier & Verdugo, 2023). In particular, this polarized pattern of PPL uptake by the fathers from households with different socioeconomic status demonstrates that the idea of "involved fatherhood" may collide with the prevailing economic necessity in lower-resource countries like Bulgaria.

We found that the uptake of PPL by fathers is positively associated with gender egalitarian attitudes, rejecting the stereotype that PPL is only for women (Mauerer, 2023). The use of paternity leave is also strongly connected to fathers' gender egalitarian attitudes regarding men's knowledge and capacity/capability to care for a baby or a small child; their capability to establish an emotional bond with the child as mothers; and the positive effect of fathers' involvement in childcare through the use of PPL on family connectedness. The positive association found in the study between the experience with PPL and gender egalitarian attitudes towards men's caring roles in the family is visible among both highly educated men and fathers with secondary or lower education, with some exceptions. In particular, men with secondary and lower education who used PPL are less likely to agree that fathers' use of parental leave increases family connectedness. This result may be related to economic necessity faced by disadvantaged families, which may provoke the need for earlier return to work of the mother and transfer of the leave to the father. In this case, it is not the affirmative attitudes towards "involved fatherhood" but rather the financial needs and concerns about handling household tasks when the baby is newborn that provoke fathers' use of PPL.

The results from the models also suggest that having more than one child may be associated with an accumulation of experience and an increasing need for childcare support, which affects attitudes of fathers about the positive effect of paternity leave, emotional bonding with the child/children, and men's caring capacities. Fathers living in small residential places (small towns or villages) are more likely to have a positive attitude about men's knowledge and capacity to take care of a baby or a small child. Stronger family orientations and more traditional family culture prevailing in small residential places may influence positive perceptions about caring roles and capacities of fathers. These results show that gender attitudes about men's and women's caring roles and "gendered norms and hegemonic masculinity perceptions" (Gheyoh Ndzi & Holmes, 2023) in different spheres of society are strongly connected with the uptake of PPL by men (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Kaufman, 2017).

In a nutshell, our survey results suggest that Bulgarian fathers take part in many childcare tasks, yet deep-rooted traditional attitudes and barriers persist. Although there have been notable shifts in gender roles since the post-socialist transition, the male breadwinner norm remains deeply entrenched. Economic restructuring and the disproportionate impact of job losses on women have reinforced this model. In 2024, Bulgarian men in full-time employment worked an average of 39.6 hours per week, significantly above the EU average of 36.0 hours (Eurostat, 2025). Wage disparities, gendered career opportunities, and limited access to affordable childcare further constrain dual-earner household arrangements and contribute to the continued dominance of maternal leave uptake.

The concept of "hybrid masculinity" provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the evolving attitudes and behaviors of Bulgarian fathers. Hybrid masculinity refers to the incorporation of caregiving, emotional engagement, and nurturing behaviors—traits traditionally associated with femininity—into masculine identities, while still preserving elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as authority and status (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 2018; Demetriou, 2001). Fathers may thus be seen as occupying a transitional position between traditional and emerging masculine roles (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020).

Comparable findings have emerged in studies of Austrian (Mauerer, 2025) and Canadian (Doucet, 2018) fathers, where increased involvement in caregiving coexists with an ongoing prioritization of employment, power, and control. Kaufman (2013) also identifies a range of fatherhood types among Americans: "old dads," who follow the traditional breadwinner role; "new dads," who seek to balance work and family life; and "superdads," who restructure their careers to prioritize caregiving. Bulgarian fathers in the survey reflect a similar intermediate state. Those with access to remote work arrangements are more likely to take parental leave and engage actively in childcare. While remote work can blur the lines between professional and domestic responsibilities, formal parental leave is often viewed as a meaningful opportunity to bond with one's child. However, such flexibility is typically available only to highly qualified and well-compensated workers, thereby reinforcing existing social and economic hierarchies. As shown from our survey, for these fathers, parental leave serves as a complement to their careers, enabling them to reconcile professional and caregiving roles without compromising their autonomy or occupational standing.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is self-selected (voluntary response) sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings and calls for caution when drawing conclusions about the broader population of fathers in the national context. At the same time, the sample's bias toward fathers who have taken longer periods of transferable PPL offers a unique opportunity to examine differences between users and non-users. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. Finally, the potential for respondent bias must be acknowledged due to self-reported data and the absence of comparisons with mothers' perceptions, as fathers are known to over-report their involvement relative to mothers' reports (Kamo, 2000; Lee & Uzunalioglu, 2025).

8. Conclusion

The results of the survey on practices and attitudes of Bulgarian fathers regarding care, PPL, gender role division, and work suggest heterogeneous trends, ranging from the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes to a growing embrace of shared parenting and active paternal involvement in childcare and domestic responsibilities.

From a theoretical perspective, the article applies and expands the concept of "hybrid masculinity" to the Bulgarian context, demonstrating how some fathers combine traditional provider roles with emerging caregiving responsibilities. It highlights how gender norms, institutional structures, and socioeconomic contexts intersect to shape paternal behavior and attitudes, extending theoretical discussions on masculinity and fatherhood in post-socialist societies. It also theorizes an ongoing but incomplete transformation in gender ideologies, emphasizing the coexistence of egalitarian ideals and persistent traditional beliefs.

As a methodological contribution, the study collects primary data through a survey focused exclusively on fathers, rare in this policy domain in Bulgaria. Along with using a combination of statistical methods (descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression models), an interaction analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of how attitudes and behaviors concerning (non)use of PPL vary across sociodemographic groups.

From the empirical standpoint, the study suggests that uptake of PPL among Bulgarian fathers remains low despite the introduction of EU-compliant policies like non-transferable leave. Parental leave reforms somehow align with attitude shifts, but still, a huge gap remains between attitudes and the actual use of leave by fathers. Attitudes toward paternal involvement differ significantly by education, income, and urban/rural residence, reinforcing the importance of the socioeconomic context.

The study also reveals the main factors associated with PPL use: Fathers with egalitarian attitudes and remote work and high-status jobs are more likely to use PPL. The study also demonstrates that the male breadwinner model remains resilient, both among lower-income and middle-income fathers. The empirical data also highlight ambivalent gender role beliefs: While many fathers express support for shared parenting, they also hold conflicting views about the irreplaceability of maternal care.

To support a more inclusive and equitable model of fathers' PPL uptake, policy measures such as improved access to affordable childcare, greater incentives for family-friendly care leaves at the workplace, and workplace flexibility across sectors are essential. Only through such systemic changes can the transition toward shared parenting become more widely accessible and sustainable.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and the thematic issue editors for their valuable comments. We also thank Nickolas Blacklock for his language editing.

Funding

The project Parental Leave Policies and Practices in Bulgaria: A Study on the Attitudes of Parents and Employers to Parental Leave in the Context of Social Inequalities and Social Sustainability is funded by the National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (№ КП-06-КОСТ/6/21.05.2024).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data presented in this study are available on request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions (the data contain sensitive personal information).

Supplementary Material

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

References

Allport, B. S., Johnson, S. B., Aqil, A. R., Labrique, A. B., Nelson, T., Kc, A., Carabas, Y., & Marcell, A. V. (2018). Promoting father involvement for child and family health. *Academic Pediatrics*, *18*(7), 746–753. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2018.03.011

Bagirova, A., Blednova, N., & Neshataev, A. (2024). The right of Russian fathers to parental leave: Is a transformation of an established system necessary? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *44*(1/2), 267–285. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-08-2023-0190

Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(3), 246–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134

Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2018). On the elasticity of gender hegemony: Why hybrid masculinities fail to undermine gender and sexual inequality. In J. W. Messerschmidt, P. Y. Martin, M. A. Messner, & R. Connell (Eds.), *Gender reckonings: New social theory and research* (pp. 254–274). New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwtb3r.21

Brown, G. L., Mangelsdorf, S. C., Shigeto, A., & Wong, M. S. (2018). Associations between father involvement and father–child attachment security: Variations based on timing and type of involvement. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *32*(8), 1015–1024. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000472

Cabrera, N. J., Shannon, J. D., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2007). Fathers' influence on their children's cognitive and emotional development: From toddlers to pre-K. *Applied Developmental Science*, *11*(4), 208–213. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701762100

Cabrera, N. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Bradley, R. H., Hofferth, S., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Fatherhood in the twenty-first century. *Child Development*, *71*(1), 127–136. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00126

Cabrera, N. J., Volling, B. L., & Barr, R. (2018). Fathers are parents, too! Widening the lens on parenting for children's development. *Child Development Perspectives*, *12*(3), 152–157. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12275

Ciccia, R., & Verloo, M. (2012). Parental leave regulations and the persistence of the male breadwinner model: Using fuzzy-set ideal type analysis to assess gender equality in an enlarged Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *22*(5), 507–528. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928712456576

Conkova, N., & Ory, B. (2016). *Fathers in context: Comparative analysis of father involvement in Bulgaria and the Netherlands*. Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Department of Sociology. http://hdl.handle.net/1765/93240

Davis, S. N., & Greenstein, T. N. (2009). Gender ideology: Components, predictors, and consequences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *35*, 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115920

Demetriou, D. Z. (2001). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique. *Theory and Society*, *30*(3), 337–361. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017596718715

Dimitrova, E., Kotzeva, T., & Ilieva, K. (2025). Bulgaria country note. In I. Dobrotić, S. Blum, G. Kaufman, A. Koslowski, P. Moss, & M. Valentova (Eds.), *International review of leave policies and research 2025* (pp. 113–125). Available at: https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/

Dimova, N. (2010). Changing models of parenting in contemporary urban families in Bulgaria. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, *28*(1), 98–118. https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/view/656

Directorate-General for Communication. (2018). *Flash Eurobarometer 470: Work-life balance (v1.00)* [Data set]. European Data. http://data.europa.eu/88u/dataset/s2185_470_eng

Directorate-General for Communication. (2024). *Flash Eurobarometer FL544: Gender stereotypes—Violence against women (v1.00)* [Data set]. European Data. http://data.europa.eu/88u/dataset/s3252_fl544_eng

Dobrotić, I., & Stropnik, N. (2020). Gender equality and parenting-related leaves in 21 former socialist countries. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *40*(5/6), 495–514. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2019-0065

Dobrotić, I., Blum, S., Kaufmann, G., Koslowski, A., Moss, P., & Valentova, M. (Eds.). (2025). 21th *International review of leave policies and research 2025*. SocArXiv. https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/5c42d_v1

Doucet, A. (2018). *Do men mother? Fathering, care and parental responsibilities*. University of Toronto Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctv2fjx06p

Doucet, A. (2021). Socially inclusive parenting leaves and parental benefit entitlements: Rethinking care and work binaries. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(2), 227–237. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i2.4003

Downer, J. T., McWayne, C. M., Campos, R., & Gartner, T. (2008). Father involvement and children's early learning: A critical review of published empirical work from the past 15 years. *Marriage & Family Review*, *43*(1/2), 67–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494920802010264

Duvander, A.-Z., & Johansson, M. (2015). Parental leave use for different fathers: A study of the impact of three Swedish parental leave reforms. In G. B. Eydal & T. Rostgaard (Eds.), *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: Comparing care policies and practice* (pp. 347–370). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447310495.ch016

Elliott, K. (2016). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *19*(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203

Eneva, S. (2022, June 28). Children of transition: Work, family and public childcare services in Bulgaria after 1989. *Cross-Border Talks*. https://www.crossbordertalks.eu/2022/06/28/children-of-transition-bulgaria

European Parliament, & Council of the European Union. (2019). *Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers*. http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj

Eurostat. (2025). *Actual and usual hours of work*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Actual_and_usual_hours_of_work

Georgieva, I. (2022). Novite bashti v Evropa—Deskriptiven analiz na mazhkoto uchastie v domakinstvoto i otglezhdaneto na detzata v Bulgaria i Germania. *Nasselenie Review*, *40*(1), 115–149.

Gheyoh Ndzi, E., & Holmes, A. (2023). Paternal leave entitlement and workplace culture: A key challenge to paternal mental health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *20*(8), Article 5454. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20085454

Haas, L., & Rostgaard, T. (2011). Fathers' rights to paid parental leave in the Nordic countries: Consequences for the gendered division of leave. *Community, Work & Family*, *14*(2), 177–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2011.571398

Huerta, M., Adema, W., Baxter, J., Han, W.-J., Lausten, M., Lee, R., & Waldfogel, J. (2013). *Fathers' leave, fathers' involvement and child development: Are they related? Evidence from four OECD countries* (OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 140). OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/5k4dlw9w6czq-en

Javornik, J. (2016). Maternal employment in post-socialist countries: Understanding the implications of childcare policies. In T. Roosalu & D. Hofäcker (Eds.), *Rethinking gender, work and care in a new Europe* (pp. 189–214). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137371096_9

Jeong, J., McCoy, D. C., Yousafzai, A. K., Salhi, C., & Fink, G. (2016). Paternal stimulation and early child development in low- and middle-income countries. *Pediatrics*, *138*(4), Article e20161357. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1357

Jessee, V., & Adamsons, K. (2018). Father involvement and father–child relationship quality: An

intergenerational perspective. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, *18*(1), 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2018.1405700

Kamo, Y. (2000). "He said, she said": Assessing discrepancies in husbands' and wives' reports on the division of household labor. *Social Science Research*, *29*(4), 459–476. https://doi.org/10.1006/ssre.2000.0674

Kasamatsu, H., Tsuchida, A., Matsumura, K., Hamazaki, K., Inadera, H., & Japan Environment and Children's Study Group. (2021). Paternal childcare at 6 months and risk of maternal psychological distress at 1 year after delivery: The Japan Environment and Children's Study (JECS). *European Psychiatry*, *64*(1), Article e38. https://doi.org/10.1192/j.Europsy.2021.2213

Kaufman, G. (2013). *Superdads: How fathers balance work and family in the 21st century*. New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814749159.001.0001

Kaufman, G. (2017). Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, *21*(3), 310–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2017.1307806

Kotsadam, A., & Finseraas, H. (2011). The state intervenes in the battle of the sexes: Causal effects of paternity leave. *Social Sciences Research*, *40*(6), 1611–1622. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.06.011

Lamb, M. E. (Ed.). (2010). *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed.). Wiley.

Lamb, M. E., Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1987). A biosocial perspective on paternal behavior and involvement. In J. Lancaster, J. Altmann, A. Rossi, & L. Sherrod (Eds.), *Parenting across the life span: Biosocial dimensions* (pp. 111–142). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315126005-7

Lee, Y., & Uzunalioglu, M. (2025). (How) does fathers' uptake of leave equalize the gendered division of childcare and housework? A review and reflection. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-06-2025-0398

Luleva, A. (2018). Mazhe i mazhestvenosti v post-sotzialisticheska Bulgaria. *Sotsiologicheski problemi*, *50*(2), 590–604.

Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*(4), 1173–1191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01173.x

Marynissen, L., Mussino, E., Wood, J., & Duvander, A.-Z. (2019). Fathers' parental leave uptake in Belgium and Sweden: Self-evident or subject to employment characteristics? *Social Sciences*, *8*(11), Article 312. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8110312

Mauerer, G. (2023). Paid parental leave in correlation with changing gender role attitudes. *Social Sciences*, *12*(9), Article 490. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090490

Mauerer, G. (2025). Fatherhood practices and shared parental leave: Advancing gender equity in parenting. *Social Sciences*, *14*(5), Article 269. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14050269

MenCare. (n.d.). *MenCare*. https://www.mencare.org

National Statistical Institute. (2023). *Detzata v Bulgaria prez 2023*. https://www.nsi.bg/file/26379/Children2023.pdf

Nenova, G. (2017). Savremenni predizvikatelstva i perspektivi pred kontzeptualiziraneto na roditelstvoto. *Nasselenie Review*, *35*(2), 149–165.

Nordenmark, M. (2015). Gender regime, attitudes towards childcare and actual involvement in childcare among fathers. In G. B. Eydal & T. Rostgaard (Eds.), *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: Comparing care policies and practice* (pp. 163–184). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447310471.003.0008

O'Brien, M., & Wall, K. (2017). *Comparative perspectives on work-life balance and gender equality: Fathers on leave alone*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0

OECD. (2022). *Reducing the gender employment gap in Hungary*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/fe5bc945-en

Ory, B. (2019). *Drivers and barriers of involved fatherhood: Family characteristics, social class, and country context*. Erasmus University Rotterdam. http://hdl.handle.net/1765/118720

Périvier, H., & Verdugo, G. (2023). Where are the fathers? Effects of earmarking parental leave for fathers in France. *ILR Review*, *77*(1), 88–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/00197939231201570

Petts, R. J., & Knoester, C. (2018). Paternity leave-taking and father engagement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *80*(5), 1144–1162. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12494

Pfau-Effinger, B. (2005). Culture and welfare state policies: Reflection on a complex interrelation. *Journal of Social Policy*, *34*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279404008232

Pleck, J. H. (2010). Paternal involvement: Revised conceptualization and theoretical linkages with child outcomes. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed., pp. 58–93). Wiley.

Pragg, B., & Knoester, C. (2017). Parental leave use among disadvantaged fathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, *38*(8), 1157–1185. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15623585

Puglisi, N., Rattaz, V., Favez, N., & Tissot, H. (2024). Father involvement and emotion regulation during early childhood: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, *12*(1), Article 675. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02182-x

Rehel, E. M. (2013). When dad stays home too: Paternity leave, gender, and parenting. *Gender & Society*, *28*(1), 110–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213503900

Rostgaard, T., & Lauste, M. (2015). The coming and going of the father's quota in Denmark: Consequences for fathers' parental leave take-up. In G. B. Eydal & T. Rostgaard (Eds.), *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: Comparing care policies and practice* (pp. 277–302). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447310495.ch013

Salmi, M., & Lammi-Taskula, J. (2015). Policy goals and obstacles for fathers' parental leave in Finland. In G. B. Eydal & T. Rostgaard (Eds.), *Fatherhood in the Nordic welfare states: Comparing care policies and practice* (pp. 303–324). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447310495.ch014

Saxonberg, S., & Maříková, H. (2023). The Central European world of fatherhood policies: How individual attitudes mediate the norm of threeness in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Journal of Family Studies*, *29*(6), 2509–2523. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2023.2179525

Scambor, E., Bergmann, N., Wojnicka, K., Belghiti-Mahut, S., Hearn, J., Holter, Ø. G., Gärtner, M., Hrženjak, M., Scambor, C., & White, A. (2014). Men and gender equality: European insights. *Men and Masculinities*, *17*(5), 552–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X14558239

Sponton, A. (2023). Reluctant fathers? A mixed-methods approach to grasp the diversity of mechanisms behind paternity leave non-take-up. *Population*, *78*(1), 83–116. https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.2301.0087

Stoyanova, T., Zhivkov, D., Georgieva, A., Petrov, D., Shahbazyuan, L., & Dmova, R. (2014). *Naglasi, praktiki, barieri pred aktivnoto mazhko vklyuchvane v grizhite za detza*. MenCare Bulgaria. https://www.ngobg.info/bg/documents/1223.html

Tanquerel, S., & Grau-Grau, M. (2020). Unmasking work-family balance barriers and strategies among working fathers in the workplace. *Organization*, *27*(5), 680–700. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508419838692

The Equal Parenting Project—Policy impact. (2023, July 17). *The York Policy Engine*. https://www.york.ac.uk/policy-engine/news-and-blogs/2023/the-equal-parenting-project

Yang, Y. T., Wallington, S. F., & Morain, S. (2022). Paid leave for fathers: Policy, practice, and reform. *Milbank Quarterly*, *100*(4), 973–990. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12590

Ziegler, L., & Bamieh, O. (2023). *What drives paternity leave: Financial incentives or flexibility?* (IZA Discussion Paper No. 15890). Institute of Labor Economics. https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/15890/what-drives-paternity-leave-financial-incentives-or-flexibility

About the Authors



Tatyana Kotzeva is a professor in sociology and social demography at the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her research and publications focus on family policy, parenthood, youth, and women's health.



Elitsa Dimitrova is an associate professor in sociology at the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her research and publications focus on fertility and family studies, adolescent health, social demography, family policy, and research methods in social sciences.



Kalina Ilieva is a PhD student in sociology at the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her PhD thesis is on the mechanisms of social diffusion of cohabitations in Bulgaria. Other research interests and fields of study include sociology of the family, family policy, and demographic change.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10960
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10960

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Involved Fatherhood in Slovakia? A Multi-Dimensional Picture Painted Using Multiple Methods

Zuzana Dančíková

Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Correspondence: Zuzana Dančíková (z.dancikova@lse.ac.uk)

Submitted: 16 July 2025 **Accepted:** 13 January 2026 **Published:** 18 February 2026

Issue: This article 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

While multiple Western European countries have introduced leave policies that set aside well-paid leave for fathers—policies expected to support more involved fatherhood—post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries were slower to follow. The 2010 Slovak fathers' leave policy reform was an early regional exception in granting fathers 28 weeks of high leave benefits, not transferable to mothers. The reform provides a unique opportunity to explore the extent to which such policies may foster involved fatherhood in a post-socialist context characterized by practices, individual attitudes, and societal norms geared towards fathers' economic provision rather than hands-on childcare. I draw on a three-dimensional conceptualization of paternal involvement, entailing engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, and a combination of methods: qualitative (38 interviews with fathers and mothers) and quantitative (unique administrative microdata). My qualitative analysis shows that fathers' leave-taking can stimulate greater engagement and accessibility, but brings about less change in fathers' responsibility for children. My quantitative analysis reveals further limits to the policy's potential for fostering fathers' involvement: A considerable proportion of fathers were excluded from using the policy, and among those eligible, fathers with lower-class markers were less likely to use it.

Keywords

Central and Eastern Europe; involved fatherhood; leave policy for fathers; Slovakia

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation and Theoretical Considerations

Historically, scholarly attention to fathers' involvement in the care of their children prioritized their role as economic providers (Takács, 2020). In the 1980s, the concept of involved fatherhood, put forth by Lamb et al. (1985), turned attention to a different, hands-on model of paternal involvement linked to the development of caring masculinities in fathers (see also Suwada, 2017; Takács, 2020). This model entails engagement (direct interaction with the child, like care or play), accessibility (being physically and mentally available or supervising the child), and responsibility (ensuring the child is taken care of; see Lamb, 2000).

Fathers' involvement with their children has been linked to policies that allow "equal" parenthood (O'Brien & Wall, 2017), and specifically to leave policies for fathers (Brandth & Kvande, 2016; Huerta et al., 2014; Wray, 2020), in particular when fathers are encouraged to take longer leaves (Knoester et al., 2019). Leave-taking allows fathers to spend time away from paid work, providing care, learning parenting tasks, developing routines, and gaining decision-making experience (Knoester et al., 2019). However, research on fathers' leave policies has relatively rarely operationalized Lamb's conceptualization of involved fatherhood directly and in full. In fact, despite its theoretical salience, literature on fathers' involvement has only infrequently considered changes to all three dimensions of fathers' involvement simultaneously (Knoester et al., 2019; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

In addition, mirroring a growing cultural shift towards more involved fatherhood in Northwest Europe, much literature linking leave policy and fatherhood has focused on the Nordic countries as well as a subset of other Global North contexts, prominently featuring anglophone countries like Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (Huerta et al., 2014; Knoester et al., 2019; Wray, 2020). With exceptions (Aidukaite & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, 2020; Suwada, 2017; Takács, 2020), less attention has been paid to fathers' childcare involvement in the post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In Hungary, Takács (2020) has investigated the development of fathers' caring masculinities and factors that enable or constrain paternal involvement. Though she found fathers gaining more experience with and appreciation of their emotional involvement with their children, these developments were limited as fathers persisted in their role of (modified) breadwinners. Factors constraining fathers' involvement in care included societal and workplace norms, but also a lack of supportive policies. A Lithuanian leave policy for fathers is at the center of a paper by Aidukaite and Telisauskaite-Cekanavice (2020); however, the authors found the policy was understood by Lithuanians more as a means to support the family financially than to foster fathers' hands-on involvement. In Poland, Suwada (2017) has argued that fathers had not been encouraged to develop more involved fathering through the implementation of supportive policy in the first place. In sum, CEE scholarship on involved fatherhood has told a story of limited transformation. Both the meagre attention paid to involved fathering and the limited transformation observed may be partly due to a slower introduction of policies supporting fathers' involvement in CEE countries, especially policies that set aside non-transferable and well-remunerated periods of leave time for fathers.

Slovakia became the first CEE outlier: an unusually generous 2010 reform gave fathers the right to six months of well-paid benefits, not transferable to mothers, and to be used before their child reaches the age of three. The policy change allows me to investigate whether and to what extent such a long, generous, and

non-transferable leave policy for fathers can support more involved fatherhood in a CEE setting. Hašková and Klenner (2010) argue that Czechia and Slovakia can best be described as an interrupted dual-earner model, where both fathers and mothers are expected to engage with full-time paid work throughout their lives, though men are to develop careers, while women take long breaks from paid work to stay at home with young children. Saxonberg (2014) posits that in the Visegrad Four countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), the time fathers and mothers spend with their young children is guided by the norm of threeness, which mandates that it is natural for children under three to be at home in their mothers' care. By extension, fathers' role is to provide for their children financially, which necessitates their absence from the home (see also Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023). The model is also supported by some of the most inegalitarian individual attitudes to the role of fathers in childcare in the EU. More than elsewhere, Slovaks see fathers as breadwinners and think they should prioritize paid work while mothers should stay at home (European Commission, 2010, 2014, 2017). Consequently, although before the generous benefits analyzed in this article were introduced in 2010, fathers had already been eligible for three years of parental leave associated with a low, flat-rate parental allowance, fathers took barely any leaves (Schulze & Gergoric, 2015), while mothers' long leave-taking was almost universal (Miani & Hoorens, 2014).

Despite its exceptional generosity, the Slovak leave policy for fathers has received limited attention in scholarly literature. While a 2023 paper on fatherhood in Czechia and Slovakia overlooks the policy entirely (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023), more recent papers investigate the effects of the policy on the gender structure (Dančíková, 2025) and obstacles fathers face in the workplace (Dančíková & Muter, 2026), rather than the transformation of involved fatherhood. The present article draws on the Slovak case to contribute to filling the gap in the literature on fatherhood in Slovakia and CEE, as well as on the link between fathers' leave policies and involved fatherhood more broadly, in two ways. First, it draws an explicit conceptual link between fathers' leave policy and involved fatherhood, conceptualized based on Lamb's (2000) three-dimensional typology: I investigate whether and to what extent fathers become more engaged, accessible, and responsible in response to the new, well-paid, and non-transferable policy. And second, I explore the link between policy and involved fatherhood in a setting in the under-researched CEE. I answer the following research question: What changes in fatherhood were or can be observed in Slovakia following the 2010 reform? My aims are two-fold: First, drawing on qualitative interview data, I explore the changes to fatherhood when a father takes leave, but also the limits to those changes. Second, making use of the quantitative administrative data, I analyze the broad trends in fathers' leave-taking to consider the potential of the policy to foster such changes across the population of fathers: How many fathers could take leave, and which fathers were likely to?

My qualitative findings show that fathers' leave-taking has little effect on their overall responsibility for their children. However, their engagement with and accessibility to their children may increase considerably when they take leave solo, even if less so when the mother stays at home simultaneously. However, my quantitative findings show that even such effects will be limited within the overall population of fathers in Slovakia. While the policy reform was followed by a considerable increase in fathers' leave-taking, fathers with lower-class characteristics were much less likely to make use of the policy compared with the higher-paid and educated. In addition, a large share of fathers with lower-class characteristics were altogether excluded from using the policy and capitalizing on its potential for more involved fatherhood.

This article will proceed with an introduction of the Slovak leave policy for fathers and its context, followed by a laying out of my analytical approach. I will then present my findings and conclude with a brief discussion.

2. The Slovak Case: A Generous Leave Policy For Fathers in a Context Geared Towards Fathers' Breadwinning

Like much of CEE, Slovakia is a late adopter of policies aimed at supporting involved fatherhood. A mix of leave policies has been developing since the 1960s, when the Czechoslovak state socialist regime introduced unpaid extended maternity leave of one year. Between the late 1960s and 1980s, the leave was gradually lengthened to three years. Fathers entered the leave policy landscape only in the 1980s, when fathers of children under the age of two were given the right to maternity benefits if looking after their child full-time and not living with the mother or a partner, or if the mother was unable to provide care to the child (Federálne zhromaždenie Československej socialistickej republiky, 1984). In 1990, a three-year flat-rate allowance became available to all fathers (Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky, 1990). Fathers' entitlement to parental leave was only introduced after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, in 2002, when they became eligible for 3 years of leave. However, though parental leave was an individual entitlement, parental allowance was a family entitlement and could only be taken by one parent at a time.

In 2010, with the policy at the centre of this article, fathers were granted an individual, non-transferable entitlement of 6.5 months of "maternity benefits" (for more on this misnomer, see below in this section), on par with mothers' post-birth maternity benefit entitlement (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, 2010b). In the original legislation, the benefits amounted to 60% of fathers' previous income; by 2017, the rate increased to 75%. The benefits were not subject to taxation and so amounted to most fathers' full net income. Fewer than 10% of fathers earned more than the generous benefit cap, meaning very few families would face a loss of income when fathers took leave, especially when mothers simultaneously (re)started paid work.

Though mothers were to use their maternity benefit directly after giving birth, fathers could use theirs at any point before their child reached the age of three. No dedicated paternity leave was introduced to match mothers' entitlement to maternity leave; fathers could combine their new benefit entitlement with their existing individual entitlement to three years of parental leave. Parliamentary debates preceding the reform suggest that, rather than aiming to broadly support involved fatherhood or gender equality, the policy was originally only intended for adoptive fathers (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, 2010a) and introduced alongside similar legislation for adoptive mothers, to grant them time to bond with their newly adopted children. However, the policy was written in a way that ultimately extended benefits to all fathers with a history of insurance contributions (at least nine months of paid work-related or voluntary contributions over the two years prior to the start of the benefit period). The lack of intention to broadly intervene in fatherhood or gender equality helps explain why policymakers extended "maternity benefits" (in place for mothers) to fathers and why fathers' new benefits were to be combined with existing parental leave, rather than introduce new, dedicated paternity benefits and leave. This manner of introduction also helps explain why the reform wasn't accompanied by any government campaigns (Dančíková, 2023). The reform only entered public discourse gradually, from 2016, when Jozef Mihál, one of its authors and Minister of Labor when the policy was introduced, helped publicize it with a series of seminars, blog posts, media appearances, and a book (Mihál, 2017). The way the policy was introduced may also help understand its additional, idiosyncratic characteristics. According to an interpretation of the legislation by Mihál (2017), both fathers

and mothers can continue with paid work while drawing on their maternity benefits if their paid work is based on a new contract (as maternity benefits are tied to an interruption of income from a past contract, rather than a mere absence of income during leave). The small number of adoptive parents initially expected to benefit from the reform and expected low overall cost to taxpayers may explain less detailed scrutiny from policymakers which resulted in this option to work while receiving benefits. This option to engage in paid work while on benefits is less likely to be used by mothers, whose maternity leave directly follows giving birth and so includes physical recovery. By contrast, fathers' combining the benefits with paid work has drawn considerable attention from both policymakers and the Slovak media ("Podľa Sme Rodina," 2019; "Richterovo ministerstvo," 2019).

Despite the idiosyncratic option, the length of fathers' non-transferable benefit entitlement, combined with the high wage-replacement rate and high benefit cap, makes the policy one of the most generous of its kind globally. Leaders in fathers' leave policy typically grant men shorter and less well-paid quotas: Fathers in Iceland and Sweden are entitled to 20 weeks of non-transferable benefits and receive 80% and 77.6% of their previous pay, respectively, but benefits in both countries are taxed (Arnalds et al., 2023; Duvander & Löfgren, 2023). Before the 2010 reform, the policy mix in Slovakia, intertwined with a significant gender pay gap, was more conducive to mothers' than fathers' leave-taking. Though both parents could take three years of parental leave (separately or simultaneously), only one at a time could use the parental allowance. The gender pay gap in Slovakia reached 27.7% (Eurostat, 2023) in 2002, the earliest year for which relevant Eurostat data is available. By 2010, the year of the reform at hand, it narrowed to 19.6%, but regional comparison shows it remained the seventh largest in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). By 2021, the most recent year for which data has been published at the time of writing, the gender pay gap shrank further to 16.6%, but widened compared to other EU countries, becoming the fifth largest in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). The considerable gap likely contributed to fathers' negligible use of the parental allowance (Schulze & Gergoric, 2015), which was overwhelmingly used by mothers (Miani & Hoorens, 2014).

Fathers' limited leave-taking was also reflected in—and likely underpinned by—attitudes geared towards mothers' rather than fathers' care of young children. Based on 2012 ISSP data, at 60%, people in Slovakia were the most likely in the OECD to believe that paid leave should be taken entirely by the mother, even if both parents were in similar work situations. Some 10% thought leave should be split by mothers and fathers equally (OECD, 2016), showing potential for fathers' greater involvement in care. Yet, before the reform, Slovakia was also tied for the third-highest proportion of people in the EU who opposed men staying at home to look after children. Half of Slovaks were against men taking care of children, well over the EU average of 36% (European Commission, 2010). Several years after the policy came into effect, Slovaks were still the most likely in the EU to think that fathers must put their careers ahead of childcare, at 48%, compared to the EU average of 29% (European Commission, 2014) and the third most likely to think men's most important role was to earn money, at 75%, compared to the EU average of 43% (European Commission, 2017). Accordingly, Slovaks were much more likely to believe that women's main role was to look after the home and family (73%) than the EU average (44%).

Fathers' limited involvement was also underpinned by the gendered societal norm on leave-taking. Sekeráková Búriková (2019) speaks of a cultural preference for mothers' care for small children. While women are expected to be in paid work full-time for most of their adult lives, according to the norm, it is natural for children to be in the care of their mothers until the age of three (Saxonberg, 2014; Saxonberg & Mařík ová, 2023). While I found

no literature explicitly speaking of an equally clear norm related to the role of fathers, it is implied in the norm of threeness: The mother's staying at home excludes the father from doing so (Saxonberg & Maříková, 2023).

The unexpected introduction of a generous leave policy for fathers into the inegalitarian Slovak setting presents a chance to explore what transformation of fatherhood may follow from a generous leave benefit reserved for fathers in the under-researched CEE context characterized by little support for fathers' involvement in childcare.

3. Analytical Approach: Qualitative Analysis of Interviews and Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data

To explore changes to fatherhood following the reform, I combine qualitative (thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (descriptive and regression analysis of administrative data) data and methods (see Table 1).

Table 1. Data and methods used.

	Method	Data
1	Qualitative (thematic) analysis of interview data	Semi-structured interviews with 38 parents
2	Quantitative analysis of administrative data	Administrative dataset of fathers eligible for benefits in 2011–mid-2019 (n = 446 thousand observations)

3.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

In response to the first aim of this article—to explore the different extent to which the introduction of the new policy may stimulate fathers' greater involvement along the three dimensions of fatherhood—I analyzed qualitative interview data. Between fall 2019 and fall 2020, I interviewed 38 parents, 36 in 18 different-gender couples, and one mother and father whose partners did not wish to take part in the research. I reached out to participants through social media, my personal and professional networks, and snowball sampling. Initially, I selected couples in which both parents were willing to participate; however, I later relaxed this rule to facilitate the recruitment of parents with specific characteristics, like lower education. To facilitate respondents' openness, I conducted interviews with mothers and fathers separately. The data was originally collected for a wider research project focused not only on parents' response to the new policy but also their decision-making about fathers' leave-taking. I recruited six couples where fathers made no use of leave or benefits and 14 couples where fathers drew on benefits but combined them with leave and paid work in different ways. This purposive sampling allowed me to account for different degrees of change in fatherhood. Six fathers took complete leave from paid work, while eight continued with paid work while receiving benefits (six of them part-time and two full-time) and relied on their partners for childcare. Parents came from various regions and professional backgrounds, but despite my efforts for sample variation, most were over thirty, highly paid and educated, and living in the capital. To protect parents' anonymity, I used pseudonyms starting with the same letter for each couple (for a sample summary, see Table 2).

Table 2. Interview sample composition.

Father				Mother				Couple	Benefit uptake
Name	Age	Education	Profession	Name	Age	Education	Profession	Residence	
Aleš	30	Higher	Civil servant	Anna	23	Middle	Medical student	Bratislava	Yes
Bruno	30	Middle	User experience designer	Betka	30	Higher	Town planner	Bratislava	Yes
Cyril	42	Higher	Library director	Cecília	32	Higher	Kindergarten teacher	Bratislava	Yes
Dano	36	Higher	Civil servant	Diana	33	Higher	Kindergarten teacher	Bratislava	No
Edo	43	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Elena	34	Higher	Lawyer	Bratislava	Yes
Fero	38	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Frederika	36	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Bratislava	Yes
Gregor	32	Higher	Schoolteacher	Gabika	29	Higher	Accounting analyst	Bratislava	Yes
Hugo	37	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Helena	33	Higher	Store owner	Bratislava	Yes
Igor	39	Higher	Manager, hospitality	Ivana	37	Higher	Structural designer	Piešťany	No
Juraj	31	Higher	Bank branch manager	Júlia	31	Higher	Civil servant	Bratislava	Yes
Kamil	31	Higher	Contract commercial specialist	Katia	29	Higher	Training coordinator	Bratislava	Yes
Lukáš	38	Middle	Technical foreman	Lucia	37	Higher	Public speaking coach	Bratislava	Yes
Martin	37	Higher	Schoolteacher	Mirka	31	Higher	Bank branch manager	Detva	Yes
Krištof	38	Higher	Planning engineer	Katarína	33	Higher	Civil servant	Žilina	No
Ondrej	33	Higher	Training coordinator	Olívia	30	Higher	Community coordinator, NGO	Banská Bystrica	No
Patrik	39	Middle	Transport foreman	Paulína	43	Middle	Sales assistant	Nemecká	No
Richard	28	Middle	Quality technician	Not interviewed	-	Middle	Sales assistant	Spišská Nová Ves	Yes
Samo	37	Lower	Factory worker	Sandra	37	Lower	Kitchen staff	Veľká Lomnica	No
Not interviewed	35	Middle	Construction contractor	Táňa	25	Middle	Sales assistant	Podbrezová	No
Ulysses	40	Higher	Manager, private corporation	Uľa	38	Higher	Researcher	Bratislava	Yes

I analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), developing codes both from the literature and the empirical material. With initial coding, I paid attention to the outlines of the parents' leave division (fathers' leave-taking, its length, continued paid work, mothers' return to paid work); the details of fathers' involvement (their presence and availability, activities undertaken, and assumed responsibilities); and the implications of fathers' involvement for the relationship with children. Eventually, I established several themes that informed my analysis, including fathers' greater accessibility, increased engagement and limited responsibility, effects on father–child relationship, and time-boundedness of effects.

While my analysis in this article draws on an understanding of changes to fatherhood acquired from the entire sample, I illustrate my arguments primarily with quotes from one couple, Fero and Frederika, both high-earning corporate managers and parents of a first-born daughter and second-born son. Fero took leave with both children and did no paid work while on leave with either. He used not only the 28 weeks of maternity benefits with each child but also drew on the parental allowance available to parents as a family entitlement. Unlike the maternity benefit, the parental allowance was still very rarely used by fathers at the time of my interviews. Overall, he stayed at home for a full year with his daughter and almost ten months with his son. However, Fero's two leaves differed considerably in terms of his involvement: During his first leave, he was on leave solo, as Frederika travelled for work every week. During Fero's second leave, Frederika was between jobs and so still at home after his leave started. This set-up is unique in research on fathers' leave-taking and presents an opportunity for a direct comparison of the two modes of fathers' leave-taking, solo and together with the mother. In addition to the case of Fero and Frederika, I underscore my analysis with quotes from interviews with further parents.

Together, this material presents an opportunity to consider both the potential of policy to foster fathers' greater involvement and differences in that potential depending on the mother's presence in the home. However, the qualitative data provide little insight into the transformation of paternal involvement across the population of fathers in Slovakia.

3.2. Quantitative Analysis of Administrative Data

To fulfil the second aim of this article—to analyze the broad trends in father's leave-taking in order to consider the potential of the policy to foster such changes across the population of fathers—I used a unique administrative dataset, which covers the entire population of fathers eligible for the new benefits from their introduction in 2011 until mid-2019, the most recent data available at the time I negotiated access to data from the Slovak Ministry of Finance. I constructed the dataset from four separate registries held by the Ministry:

- The registry of physical persons of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (register fyzických osôb Ministerstva vnútra Slovenskej republiky), which allowed for linking fathers to their children and the mothers of their children, but also included data on family members' age, usual residence, and ethnicity (identified in microdata by the Ministry of Finance based on the 2013 Atlas of Roma Communities).
- The registry of persons with social security of the Social Insurance Agency (register poistencov Sociálnej poisťovne), with data on benefits paid out.
- The registry of persons looking for employment of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (register uchádzačov o zamestnanie Ústredia práce sociálnych vecí a rodiny), with data on parents' income from contract work (monthly) and self-employment (on an annual basis).

- The central registry of university students of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (centrálny register študentov vysokých škôl Ministerstva školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky), with data on parents' education.

The final dataset comprised approximately 446 thousand observations of fathers eligible for benefits with individual children, amounting to 71% of children born in the relevant period. Fathers were ineligible for leave in more than 183 thousand or 29% of cases. The dataset contained information on fathers' benefit uptake (rather than fathers' leave-taking as such, for which data was not available).

The dataset allowed me to explore broad trends in fathers' response to the policy—changes in fathers' leave-taking following the policy change: How many fathers were excluded from using the policy and so an opportunity to use it to become more involved fathers due to ineligibility, how many fathers used the policy, and in what way (together with mothers or in conjunction with paid work). The data also allowed for a regression analysis to consider which fathers were more likely to use the policy. I used a binary logistic regression to distinguish fathers who drew on the benefits from those who didn't, depending on mothers' and fathers' individual characteristics, including their income before and during the period of fathers' eligibility for benefits, the highest completed level of education, and ethnicity—Roma (associated with socio-economic marginalization in Slovakia) and non-Roma. I also controlled for a range of other characteristics, including parents' age, residence, and number of children, type of work (employment vs. self-employment), and the child's year of birth.

4. Analysis

To explore changes to fathers' involvement after the 2010 policy reform, I first examine findings from interview data with fathers and mothers. Then, I explore what can be gleaned from a quantitative analysis of my unique administrative dataset.

4.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data: Fathers' More Engaged and Accessible Depending on Mothers' Presence, Not More Responsible

My qualitative analysis of interviews allows for an exploration of changes to fathers' involvement in childcare when on leave, along the dimensions of paternal involvement in Lamb's typology (Lamb et al., 1985)—fathers' engagement with, accessibility to, and responsibility for their children. While drawing on my entire sample, I illustrate my analysis primarily with the case of one father, Fero, recounted both by Fero and his wife, Frederika. Fero's case is pertinent as his first leave provided the greatest opportunity for paternal involvement within my entire sample, since Frederika, a high-earning manager, spent most of her workweeks away in a different city. Moreover, Fero not only made use of the full 28 weeks of his "maternity benefit" but also drew on the low flat-rate parental allowance and stayed at home for a total of one year. This gave Fero the longest stretch of time to become more involved in childcare of all the fathers in my sample. By contrast, during Fero's second leave, at the time of our interview, Frederika had finished her leave and was no longer in receipt of benefits. However, she had quit her job and was still at home looking for a new position. This set-up allows me to also directly compare paternal engagement, accessibility, and responsibility both when on leave solo and together with the mother. I supplement my presentation of Fero's case with illustrative quotes from interviews with further respondents.

Fero engaged with his children intensively during his leaves, as he organized activities to fill the day, inside during winter (playdates, and cafes) and outside during summer (spending time in nature). Similar to Fero's engagement, his accessibility to his children increased immensely. Fero spoke of an intense, all-encompassing accessibility both physically and mentally, especially to his daughter when on leave with her on his own:

> A regular person who doesn't have children is used to taking showers on his own, going to the toilet on his own. But explain it to a 13-month-old child that [you] want to go to the toilet. If you close the door, [they] start crying….And you just don't have the heart to lock the door on your child.

Fathers' accessibility in the absence of mothers' presence allowed them to develop new caring routines and skills. Bruno, a UX designer, was a thoughtful, engaged, and, in the words of his wife, "talented" father. However, taking leave with both his children allowed him to develop his "talent" further, by learning to engage with his children in new ways:

> For instance, I can now put [my daughter] to sleep, no problem, because we have, in a matter of days or weeks, established a [new] kind of relationship. Before, she wouldn't have let me, right? She would cry for her mom….[Now] I put her to bed, or we talk, or I stroke her, I give her milk, sometimes she cries, sometimes she doesn't, but she can fall asleep.

When both parents were at home together, both paternal engagement and accessibility were considerably less intensive. Frederika recounted that when she was also present: "There are also times when [Fero] goes away, despite being on leave, he too, needs time for himself and vice versa. I'd say we more or less [divide time with children] equally."

Fathers' limited engagement and accessibility when the mothers stayed at home recurred in other parents' accounts, as fathers relied on mothers' care to pursue their careers or activities unrelated to their children's care. Multiple fathers continued with paid work in various forms and for different reasons: Cyril, writer and full-time library director, took leave from his day job with his third child, but spent long chunks of time away from his care commitments while abroad in relation to his other career—writing. In an extreme case, Lukáš, a technical foreman at a private company, took leave with both his children, but citing burnout, recounted spending considerable time away from home, while his partner Lucia, who was self-employed and working part-time as a public speaking coach, shouldered most of the children's care. Said Lukáš:

> I spent a part of my "maternity" leave on renovating the garden shed. Lucia had time to look after the children. I was officially on leave, but when Lucia was taking care of the children, I spent a part of it on something productive.

When I asked Lukáš to estimate what proportion of care he took on, he said 30–40%. Lucia estimated his share of care similarly, at 30–35%, only slightly up from 20% when she had been on leave and Lukáš was in paid work full-time. While overall, paternal engagement with and accessibility to children grew when fathers took leave, the change was much more pronounced when the leave was taken solo, compared to sharing leave-time with mothers.

Encouragingly, fathers' increased engagement and accessibility when on leave solo can be transformative for the father–child relationship. Fero reflected very positively on the evolution of his relationship with his

daughter. Their bonding was facilitated by his wife's travel for work on a weekly basis, when he was the only parent available to respond to his daughter's immediate physical and emotional needs. This qualitatively different connection persisted even when Frederika returned over the weekend:

> I've created a deep, intense, human relationship with my daughter. The kind you can't experience when you come back from work at 5, 6, 7 pm and she goes to bed at 8….The first thing is that you have more time for each other, and it was key that I was there on my own for her, that my wife wasn't there, and I wasn't just for show, it was really just the two of us. Because if it's just the two of you, you have to solve both the good and the bad, and it brings you together….When my daughter fell and was bleeding, we survived it. I remember [it] to this day….My wife would come home for the weekends, and once [my daughter] fell and ran to me….And I told myself, wow, now I am a real parent? And Frederika was sad that [our daughter] doesn't love her anymore.

The linked narratives of fathers' insufficient time with children when in paid work and of the novel, equal parent status acquired on leave, evidenced by their new ability to soothe their children, appeared repeatedly in my interviews. Juraj, a bank branch manager who took leave with his daughter, reflected that before his leave, time with his daughter was limited to two hours before the bedtime ritual started: "You don't find out what the child experiences all day, their needs, how to engage with them." Two months into his leave, the relationship with his daughter was transformed: "[My daughter] was totally dependent on me, she wanted to be with me all the time and didn't want to be with her mom." The deep father–child relationship created through intense daily engagement and round-the-clock accessibility was unlikely to be achieved when sharing leave-time with the mother: Notably, Fero did not speak of a similarly intense relationship with his son, whose care was divided between both parents to a greater degree, as Fero's leave overlapped with Frederika's time out of paid work. Similarly, Lukáš, the foreman and father of two, who spent much of his leave away from home, mused:

> I thought I had a good relationship [with my children], but during my first leave, I realized that [there was] no way [that was so]. I had been the strange mister, who came from work [in the evening]….It's better now. I can't say that, when [they] hurt themselves, they automatically come to me, but [they] no longer choose [the mother only].

Like with Fero, the children now also turn to Lukáš when in need of soothing, but less frequently, corresponding to his relatively limited accessibility and engagement.

Irrespective of being on leave solo or together with the mother, changes to fathers' responsibility for children were less profound than changes to their engagement and accessibility. When on leave, Fero did take over day-to-day responsibility for the children's needs: dressing and feeding them, managing kindergarten runs with his daughter, etc. However, he assumed limited responsibility for meeting his children's needs in terms of cooking, shopping, or cleaning, and even when travelling for work, Frederika went to great lengths to continue shouldering these responsibilities:

> Before leaving for the week…I cooked until eleven, so they would have food for two, three days. Then I [would leave] at 12 [pm], one at night to [another city], and sometimes I returned during the week to cook again. Because, at that age, a child just can't eat restaurant food, and he [Fero] just couldn't

> do it….Basically, he didn't clean, he didn't shop….When I came back at the end of the week, the flat was a pigsty….I had to do the laundry for the child, so [they] would have things to wear the following week…then maybe go buy new things…because [children] constantly grow out of something, so you are always buying things….My husband can handle buying [things], but he always needs a list, [whether it is] one milk or two…yogurts, [or] five bread rolls or seven….He has not yet matured into knowing that there has to be milk and bread rolls at home [all the time].

Similarly, Martin, a teacher and father of two who took leave with his younger daughter, recounted that his wife, Mirka, retained responsibility for 60–70% of housework, despite being back in paid work full-time and Martin "handing his daughter over" to Mirka upon her return home. Mirka was responsible for most of the cooking, laundry, and ironing.

Fero did not assume responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and planning daily or long-term purchases even when Frederika was away for days at a time. Instead of cooking, he implemented creative solutions, organizing meals in restaurants or a student canteen, dropping in at his parents' or friends' houses. However, in line with the widespread gendered division of such unpaid and mental labor, much responsibility remained with Frederika, who acutely felt the strain of it:

> Thinking of a hundred things is really hard, tiring. It would sometimes really help if Fero would initiate something that needs to be done for the family….It ranges from big things to small….A child needs to eat. Mostly, I have to tell him that the child needs [to be fed] and he can then execute it. And then [on to] big things, [like] that we need to change the kids' rooms, that is also always on me….I have to initiate every single thing.

While in Frederika's absence, Fero assumed responsibility for the children's immediate needs, but there was a limit to his taking over responsibility for tasks that required more planning. Similar limitations to fathers' responsibility were reported by other respondents, too. Both Mirka and Lucia, the partners of Martin and Lukáš, respectively, recounted that they needed to instruct their partners to carry out housework tasks. Lukáš reported that Lucia also retained responsibility for the children's health and education. Education also remained the primary domain of Juraj's wife Júlia.

Finally, there were also limitations on the extent to which paternal involvement spilled over beyond the end of leave. When both parents were back in paid work after the end of Fero's leave with their first-born, Frederika estimated 75% of childcare fell to her, while Fero took on 25%. This was partly because, to combine paid work and childcare, the couple agreed one of them would have to take a step back in their career, and without discussion, this role was assigned to the mother. While Frederika was unemployed and Fero was still on parental leave, it was gendered norms about fatherhood and motherhood rather than their respective labor market positions that drove this decision. Frederika recounted:

> It left a deep mark on me that will probably last for another decade…someone had to take care of the family, and everyone somehow expected it would be me….I had been in a higher position, much more successful, so it also had financial implications….I thought it was really unfair. Because why couldn't it be him?

Paternal involvement in hands-on childcare may have increased considerably during leave, even if to different degrees depending on the mother's presence. However, paternal involvement ebbed again upon the father's return to paid work, as their breadwinning role regained priority.

4.2. Quantitative Analysis: Potential for More Involved Fatherhood Varies With Individual Characteristics and Paid Work

My quantitative analysis of administrative data allowed me to explore the potential of the policy to stimulate involvement across the population of fathers in Slovakia. Fathers' leave-taking increased considerably after the 2010 reform, suggesting scope for more involved fatherhood during the period of leave (see Figure 1). While fathers' uptake remained very low in 2011–2015, it took off considerably from 2016 and 2017, when Slovak media started paying increased attention to the policy ("Načo chodiť do práce," 2017; Onuferová, 2017; "Slováci objavili dieru," 2016). In 2019, fathers' uptake was projected (based on data for the first half of 2019, the final period for which I could access data) to reach nearly 13-thousand fathers or 23.2% compared to the number of children born during the same period (data was only available by calendar years and could not be related to the number of births in each year; in addition, an equal proportion of fathers using benefits in their children's first, second and third year of life was assumed here). Of those eligible for the benefit, 36% made use of it. However, uptake remained relatively limited compared with other contexts, like pioneering Norway and Sweden, where almost all fathers were taking their daddy quotas—well-paid portions of parental leave reserved for them—within years after these policies were introduced (Dančíková, 2023).

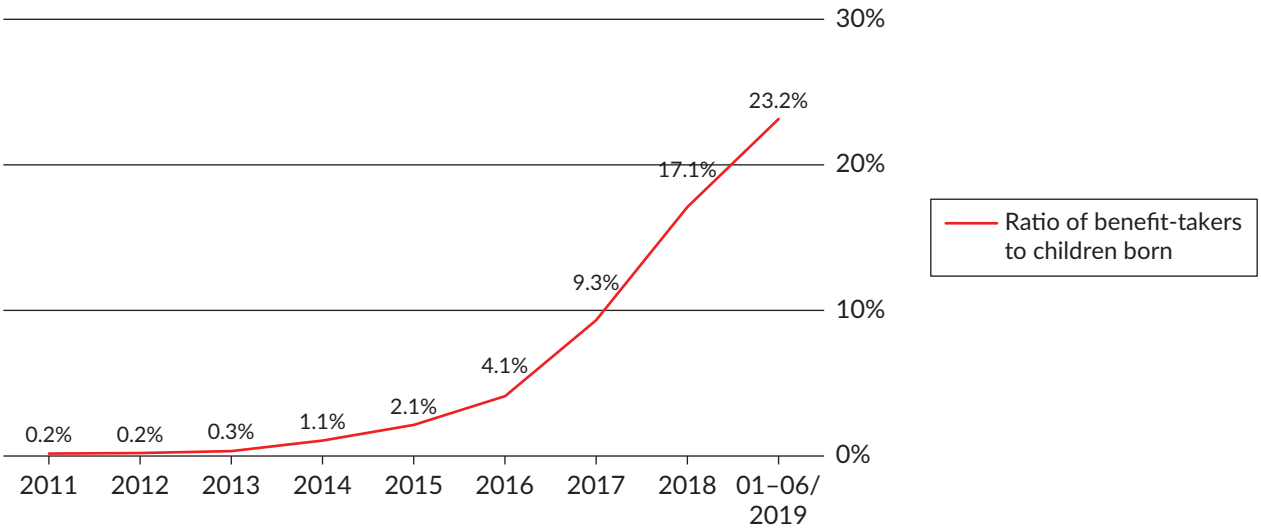


Figure 1. Fathers' uptake of benefits after the 2010 reform.

Consistent with findings from other contexts, the quantitative data also show that not all fathers were equally likely to take leave, and so not equally likely to use the opportunity to become more involved in childcare (see Table 3). Researchers interested in leave policies have rightly paid increasing attention to policy eligibility (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020; Uzunalioglu et al., 2021), and my data showed that almost a third of fathers (29%) were not eligible for the new policy. Eligibility is based on insurance payments for at least nine months over the two years before making a benefit application, meaning fathers are less likely to be eligible if they do not have stable employment.

Beyond stable employment, a binary logistic regression showed that even when eligible, fathers were less likely to use the benefit when they had below-average incomes, and when neither they nor their partners had completed higher education. The odds of fathers using the benefit were also considerably lower when fathers were from marginalized Roma communities. Overall, like in research from other settings (Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021), fathers' higher social class was linked to more leave-taking, and consequently, to an opportunity for more involved fatherhood.

Table 3. Logistic regression of fathers' benefit uptake, odds ratios.

Variable		Odds ratio
Education	No parent has higher education	ref
	Only mother has higher education	1.77***
	Only father has higher education	1.57***
	Both parents have higher education	2.17***
Father's income from employment	1. quartile (up to €182/month)	ref
	2. quartile (up to €642/month)	2.10***
	3. quartile (up to €1,240/month)	3.37***
	4. quartile (up to €170,436/month)	2.73***
Ratio of mother's and father's income	≤ 50%	ref
	>50% & ≤ 100%	1.07***
	>100%	1.57***
Father's income from both employment and self-employment		2.03***
Father's income from self-employment only		3.02***
Mother's income from both employment and self-employment		1.78***
Mother's income from self-employment only		2.47***
Mothers with pre-birth income		1.12***
Father from marginalized Roma communities	non-Roma	ref
	Roma	0.26***
Fathers' number of living children	1–3 children	ref
	4–6 children	0.93*
	>6 children	0.52***
Father's age	1. quartile (≤ 29)	ref
	2. quartile (≤ 33)	1.12***
	3. quartile (≤ 36)	1.11***
	4. quartile (≤ 75)	0.97
Mother's age	1. quartile (≤ 27)	ref
	2. quartile (≤ 30)	1.08***
	3. quartile (≤ 33)	1.00
	4. quartile (≤ 53)	0.94**
Multiple births		1.15**

Table 3. (Cont.) Logistic regression of fathers' benefit uptake, odds ratios.

Variable		Odds ratio
Father's usual residence—region	Bratislava	ref
	Trnava	0.81***
	Trenčín	1.17***
	Nitra	0.60***
	Žilina	1.08***
	Banská Bystrica	0.78***
	Prešov	0.85***
	Košice	0.72***
Parents' different usual residence		0.90***
Year of birth	2008	ref
	2009	2.75
	2010	12.98***
	2011	36.25***
	2012	100.02****
	2013	240.37***
	2014	586.25***
	2015	1294.71***
	2016	2481.05***
	2017	1827.55***
	2018	813.62***
	q1–2 2019	67.16***
Constant		0.0000207
Log likelihood		–76,073
Observations		445,683

Notes: * statistically significant at 10%; ** statistically significant at 5%; *** statistically significant at 1%; **** a robustness check showed that coefficients do not vary considerably with the year of birth of the child.

In addition, a large proportion of fathers made use of the option to combine benefit uptake with employment, showing that changes to fatherhood in response to the reform were likely less consequential than would seem from merely looking at benefit uptake (see Figure 2). In 2018, at the height of the trend, nearly half of all fathers who used the benefits combined them with some employment. By 2019, the share fell to less than a third, possibly due to government efforts to curb this practice (Dančíková, 2023). One in 14 (7%) fathers who drew on the benefits (or 23% of those who engaged in employment) earned more than 90% of their earlier income. This suggests that they worked full-time, and the leave policy provided no impetus for more involved fatherhood. One in six (17%) of the fathers who made use of the benefits (57% of those who combined employment with benefits) earned no more than half of their previous income, which suggests their paid work was part-time. For these fathers, the 2010 reform facilitated some time off from employment, and so a notable, if limited, shift towards greater involvement in the care of their children.

Paradoxically, higher-paid fathers were more likely to combine employment with benefits. In 2019, more than half (57%) of fathers who engaged in employment while on benefits earned more than 1.25% of the

average wage. Only 14% earned less than three-quarters of the average wage. Hence, while less-paid and less-educated fathers were less likely to make use of the benefits, once they did, they were more likely to take complete breaks from paid work.

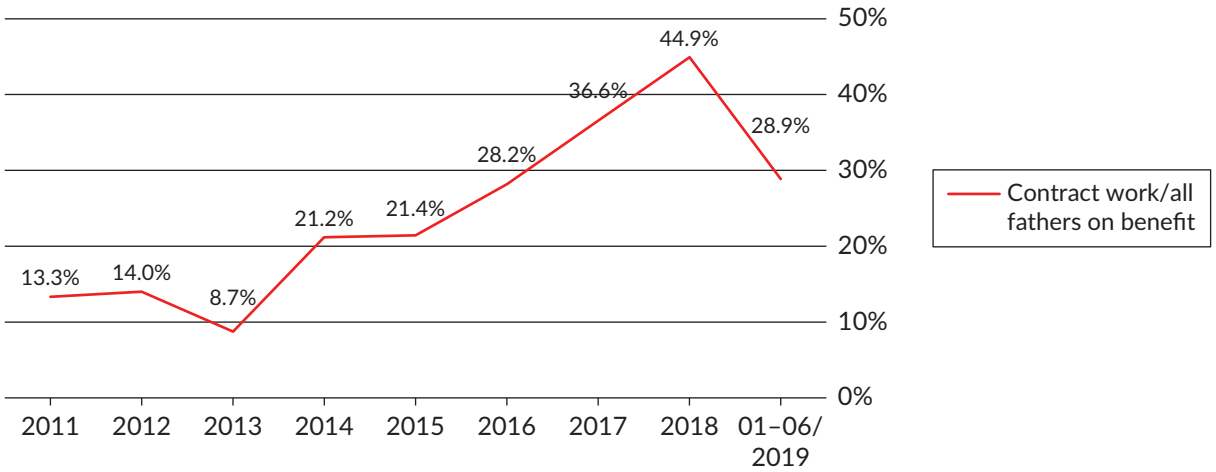


Figure 2. Proportion of fathers with income from paid work while on benefits.

In sum, the quantitative administrative data painted a broad-brush picture of the leave-taking of Slovak fathers following the 2010 reform and its capacity to support more involved fatherhood: First, almost a third of fathers were excluded from the policy altogether due to their unstable labor market attachment. Second, despite the promising overall trend in benefit uptake among those eligible, fathers with lower socio-economic status characteristics (lower-educated and lower-paid and from a marginalized ethnicity) were less likely to use the policy. Finally, for a considerable proportion of those fathers who used the benefits, their involvement in childcare was likely limited through their simultaneous employment, though these were paradoxically more likely to be higher-paid fathers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article explored changes to paternal involvement in childcare in Slovakia following a 2010 reform that granted fathers 28 weeks of high "maternity benefits," not transferable to mothers, and to be combined with parental leave before their child reaches the age of three. I drew on a combination of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with fathers and mothers, and quantitative administrative data. My qualitative findings have shown both the potential for fathers' greater involvement in response to the new policy, but also limits to that potential. Compared with the policy mix previously in place, the reform did more to encourage fathers' leave-taking, and when used by fathers to take full breaks from paid work, it allowed for a transformation of paternal accessibility to and engagement with their children. In terms of accessibility, fathers spent considerably more time with children during which they were available to respond to the children's physical and emotional needs. The leave-time also stimulated greater engagement—it encouraged fathers to plan and carry out a range of activities with their children. However, both fathers' accessibility and engagement increased comparatively less when mothers stayed at home as well, than when fathers stayed at home solo. Fathers' staying at home together with the mother is quite common across contexts (O'Brien & Wall, 2017), but may be particularly likely in settings where leave-taking is understood as the mother's prerogative, like in the CEE Visegrad Four countries, guided by the norm of threeness (Saxonberg, 2014).

Fathers' sharing leave with mothers is even more likely when enabled by policy design that allows for combining employment with benefits, as in the Slovak case. A similar design, encouraging fathers to draw on benefits without having to cut back on paid work, has also been put in place in Lithuania (Aidukaite & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, 2020).

In my sample, the presence of mothers had less of a moderating effect on fathers' responsibility for childcare beyond the children's immediate needs—the bulk of responsibility remained in the hands of mothers even when fathers took leave solo. In addition, paternal involvement diminished again markedly after the end of leave, contributing to ongoing—and so far inconclusive—debates on whether the effects of fathers' leave-taking on parents' division of childcare and paid labor are time-limited or last beyond the end of leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Wray, 2020). My data suggested that increased maternal involvement may be considered automatic after both parents return to paid work, irrespective of the mother's wishes.

Further limitations to the capacity of the policy to transform fatherhood in Slovakia into being more involved were revealed by my quantitative data. Almost a third of fathers were excluded from using the policy altogether, due to an insufficient record of insurance contributions—a sign of no or unstable labor market attachment. Of those eligible, fathers' benefit uptake increased considerably, reaching 36% by 2019 (or 23.2% of fathers compared to the number of children born in the same year). However, among these fathers, those with lower-class characteristics (their own and the mother's lower education and income, as well as their belonging to the marginalized Roma community) were less likely to use the policy and so benefit from its potential to stimulate their greater engagement with and accessibility to their children. This is consistent with findings from other contexts, where research also found that fathers with higher incomes and higher completed education, as well as with partners with higher incomes and education, were more likely to take leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Lappegard, 2008; Sundström & Duvander, 2002). Finally, the quantitative data showed the extent of the practice of fathers combining employment with leave benefits. In 2018, more than two in five fathers who used the policy combined their benefits with employment, part-time or full-time. The proportion of fathers making use of this option fell to less than one in three in 2019. The drop coincided with public scrutiny of this practice and public debates about the purpose of the leave policy for fathers—whether it was to support fathers' time with children or help them provide for their families financially (Dančíková, 2023). Fathers' widespread combining of employment with benefits can be explained both by such conflicting messaging about the aims of the policy in public debates and the inegalitarian gender structure, which persisted in Slovakia despite the new policy and continued driving fathers towards breadwinning rather than caregiving (Dančíková, 2025).

To my knowledge, no data has been released by the Slovak government on whether the practice of combining employment with benefits has continued to decline after 2019 or rebounded after public scrutiny eased off. More quantitative research on the latest microdata is needed to chart not only more recent trends in this practice, but the trajectory of fathers' leave-taking altogether. More research should also zoom in on the nuances of paternal involvement—their engagement, accessibility, and responsibility after the end of leave. Future research could also address the limitations of this article. My quantitative analysis paid attention to differences in fathers' leave-taking depending on their individual characteristics and made links to fathers' socio-economic status. However, differences in paternal involvement based on class were not directly addressed in my qualitative analysis. This was due to purposive sampling implemented for the

broader project that my data was originally collected for, which aimed to cover not only fathers' responses to the policy but also parents' decision-making process about their response, including deciding that the fathers make no use of the policy at all. In addition, while this article provides insight into the "what"—what changes to paternal involvement followed the 2010 reform and the limits to those changes, it does not shed light on the "why"—why these changes have been limited. Further research should explore why an increase in responsibility seems less likely to materialize than growth in both engagement and accessibility.

The data available at the time being suggests that a well-remunerated policy that sets aside leave time for fathers does have the potential to increase fathers' childcare involvement in the post-socialist CEE context, despite the widespread inegalitarian norms, practices, and attitudes when it comes to the division of leave by mothers and fathers. CEE policymakers can draw inspiration from the Slovak case and implement daddy quotas, which may motivate mothers and fathers to divide leave more equally. However, careful attention to policy design is advised to avoid allowing fathers to draw on benefits without actually taking time off paid work to look after their children, especially in contexts where strong gendered norms and identities push parents to persist with a highly inegalitarian division of labor if policy permits it. Such contradictory design—supporting and limiting fathers' involvement at the same time—is more likely than it might seem, as illustrated by its occurrence in both Slovakia and Lithuania (Aidukaite & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, 2020). In the Slovak case, the issue could be addressed by allowing fathers to take leave part-time, but only providing benefits for the time spent out of paid work (Dančíková, 2020); in other contexts, it could be avoided with thoughtful policy design from the get-go. However, CEE policymakers should also consider a broader set of policies aimed at supporting fathers' leave-taking. Unlike in Slovakia, where the policy at hand was rolled out with little discussion or supportive measures, the introduction of the daddy quota in Sweden was preceded by decades of government campaigns to change the public perception of fatherhood and accompanied by additional campaigns, trainings, and communication with parents as well as employers (Bergman & Hobson, 2009). Such complementary policies may help close the gap between the relatively low rate of leave-taking by Slovak fathers and the much higher rates in Sweden.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my PhD supervisors, Ania Plomien and Wendy Sigle, for their support. I would also like to thank the editors of this thematic issue, Hana Hašková, Alenka Švab, Ivett Szalma, and Judit Takács, as well as the reviewers of this article. A special thanks goes to Magda Muter for her friendship and faith in this work and to Senel Wanniarachchi, whose support has been invaluable.

Funding

Data collection for this article was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/P000622/1).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The qualitative data used for this article is available upon request in the original language. The quantitative data was obtained under the condition that it would not be shared further.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used.

References

Aidukaite, J., & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, D. (2020). The father's role in child care: Parental leave policies in Lithuania and Sweden. *Social Inclusion*, *8*(4), 81–91. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i4.2962

Arnalds, Á. A., Eydal, G. B., & Gíslason, I. V. (2023). Iceland country note. In S. Blum, I. Dobrotić, G. Kaufman, A. Koslowski, & P. Moss (Eds.), *19th International review of leave policies and related research 2023*. The International Network on Leave Policies and Research. https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports

Bergman, H., & Hobson, B. (2009). Compulsory fatherhood: The coding of fatherhood in the Swedish welfare state. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Making men into fathers* (pp. 92–124). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511489440.005

Brandth, B., & Kvande, E. (2016). Masculinity and fathering alone during parental leave. *Men and Masculinities*, *21*(1), 72–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X16652659

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research. A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.

Bygren, M., & Duvander, A.-Z. (2006). Parents' workplace situation and fathers' parental leave use. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *68*(2), 363–372. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00258.x

Dančíková, Z. (2020). *Ani muži nemôžu mať všetko: Materská pre otcov a nástup matiek do práce*. Ministerstvo financií Slovenskej republiky. https://www.mfsr.sk/files/archiv/31/Komentar_materskeotcov_final.pdf

Dančíková, Z. (2023). *Understanding daddy quotas as a part of the gender structure: The case of the Slovak leave policy for fathers* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The London School of Economics and Political Science. https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4751

Dančíková, Z. (2025). Undoing or unstructuring gender: The effects of the Slovak leave policy for fathers on the change of the gender structure. *Journal of Family Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2025.2540390

Dančíková, Z., & Muter, M. (2026). Subtle discrimination of fathers in relation to leave-taking: A comparative study of Slovakia and Poland. *Work, Employment and Organizations*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1709287

Dobrotić, I., & Blum, S. (2020). Inclusiveness of parental-leave benefits in twenty-one European countries: Measuring social and gender inequalities in leave eligibility. *Social Politics*, *27*(3), 588–614. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxz023

Duvander, A.-Z., & Johansson, M. (2019). Does fathers' care spill over? Evaluating reforms in the Swedish parental leave program. *Feminist Economics*, *25*(2), 67–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2018.1474240

Duvander, A.-Z., & Löfgren, N. (2023). Sweden country note. In S. Blum, I. Dobrotić, G. Kaufman, A. Koslowski, & P. Moss (Eds.), *19th International review of leave policies and related research 2023*. The International Network. https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports

European Commission. (2010). *Special Eurobarometer: Gender equality in the EU*. http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=418

European Commission. (2014). *Special Eurobarometer 428: Gender equality report*. https://doi.org/10.2838/8374

European Commission. (2017). *Special Eurobarometer 465*. https://doi.org/10.2838/431877

Eurostat. (2023). *Gender pay gap in unadjusted form*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en

Federálne zhromaždenie Českej a Slovenskej Federatívnej Republiky. (1990). Zákon č. 382/1990 Zb. Zákon o rodičovskom príspevku. https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/print/zz/1990-382/znenie-19901001.pdf

Federálne zhromaždenie Československej socialistickej republiky. (1984). Zákon č. 110/1984 Zb. Zákon o zmenách Zákona o materskom príspevku. https://www.zakonypreludi.sk/print/zz/1984-110/znenie-19850101.pdf

Hašková, H., & Klenner, C. (2010). Why did distinct types of dual-earner moderls in Czech, Slovak and East German socieites develop and persist. *Zeitschrift Fuer Familienforschung*, *22*(3), 266–288.

Huerta, M. C., Adema, W., Baxter, J., Han, W.-J., Lausten, M., Lee, R., & Waldfogel, J. (2014). Fathers' leave and fathers' involvement: Evidence from four OECD countries. *European Journal of Social Security*, *16*(4), 308–346.

Knoester, C., Petts, R. J., & Pragg, B. (2019). Paternity leave-taking and father involvement among socioeconomically disadvantaged U.S. fathers. *Sex Roles*, *81*(5/6), 257–271. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0994-5

Lamb, M. E. (2000). The history of research on father involvement: An overview. *Marriage and Family Review*, *29*(2), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03

Lamb, M. E., Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1985). Paternal Behavior in Humans. *American Zoologist*, *25*(3), 883–894. https://about.jstor.org/terms

Lappegard, T. (2008). Changing the gender balance in caring: Fatherhood and the division of parental leave in Norway. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *27*(2), 139–159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-007-9057-2

Miani, C., & Hoorens, S. (2014). *Parents at work*. RAND Corporation. https://doi.org/10.2838/54302

Mihál, J. (2017). *Materská*. KO&KA.

Načo chodiť do práce dajte sa na rodinu: Slováci, materská je už vyššia ako plat. (2017, May 4). *Topky.sk*. https://www1.pluska.sk/rady-a-tipy/naco-chodit-prace-dajte-rodinu-slovaci-materska-je-vyssia-ako-plat

Národná rada Slovenskej republiky. (2010a). *Vyhľadávanie v prepise rozpravy. Rokovanie o vládnom návrhu zákona, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 461/2003 Z. z. o sociálnom poistení v znení neskorších predpisov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov. Volebné obdobie 5 (2010-2012), tlač 109*. https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze/rozprava/vyhladavanie&CisObdobia=5&CPT=109&CisSchodze=0&PoslanecID=0&DatumOd=1900-1-1%200:0:0&DatumDo=2100-1-1%200:0:0&TypVystupenia

Národná rada Slovenskej republiky. (2010b). Návrh zákona z 2. decembra 2010, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 461/2003 Z. z. o sociálnom poistení v znení neskorších predpisov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov. https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/Download.aspx?DocID=349594

O'Brien, M., & Wall, K. (2017). Fathers on leave alone: Setting the scene. In M. O'Brien & K. Wall (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on work-life balance and gender equality. Fathers on leave alone* (pp. 1–10). Springer Open. http://www.springer.com/series/10158

OECD. (2016). *Use of childbirth-related leave benefits*.

Onuferová, M. (2017, April 3). Mihál radí otcom skúsiť materskú, oplatí sa to aj finančne. *Denník N*. https://dennikn.sk/716005/mihal-radi-otcom-skusit-matersku-oplati-sa-to-aj-financne

Podľa Sme rodina začala Sociálna poisťovňa otcom zamietať materské. (2019, January 16). *teraz.sk*. https://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/podla-sme-rodina-zacala-sp-otcom-zamie/372720-clanok.html

Richterovo ministerstvo sa zaoberá úpravou materskej pre otcov, ale čaká na rozhodnutie súdu. (2019, May 16). *sita.sk*. https://sita.sk/richterovo-ministerstvo-sa-zaobera-upravou-materskej-pre-otcov-ale-caka-na-rozhodnutie-sudu

Rostgaard, T., & Ejrnæs, A. (2021). How different parental leave schemes create different take-up patterns: Denmark in nordic comparison. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(2), 313–324. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i2.3870

Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica, International Journal of Paediatrics*, *97*(2), 153–158. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1651-2227.2007.00572.x

Saxonberg, S. (2014). *Gendering family policies in post-communist Europe: A historical-institutional analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137319395

Saxonberg, S., & Maříková, H. (2023). The central European world of fatherhood policies: How individual attitudes mediate the norm of threeness in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. *Journal of Family Studies*, *29*(6), 2509–2523. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2023.2179525

Schulze, E., & Gergoric, M. (2015). *Maternity, paternity, and parental leave: Data related to duration and compensation rates in the European Union*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/509999/IPOL_STU(2015)509999_EN.pdf

Sekeráková Búriková, Z. (2019). Paid home-based childcare in Slovakia: Informal markets and care loops. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *29*(5), 653–665. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928719873834

Slováci objavili dieru v sociálnom systéme: Otcovia môžu rodinám prilepšiť, stačí urobiť toto. (2016, October 28). *Topky.sk*. https://www.topky.sk/cl/10/1584479/Slovaci-objavili-dieru-v-socialnom-systeme--Otcovia-mozu-rodinam-prilepsit–staci-urobit-toto

Sundström, M., & Duvander, A.-Z. (2002). Gender division of childcare and the sharing of parental leave among new parents in Sweden. *European Sociological Review*, *18*(4), 433–447.

Suwada, K. (2017). "It was necessary at the beginning to make this whole revolution": Men's attitudes to parental leaves in Sweden and Poland. *Men and Masculinities*, *20*(5), 570–587. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17727571

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in hungary? exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Uzunalioglu, M., Valentova, M., O'Brien, M., & Genevois, A. S. (2021). When does expanded eligibility translate into increased take-up? An examination of parental leave policy in Luxembourg. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(2), 350–363. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i2.3787

Wray, D. (2020). Paternity leave and fathers' responsibility: Evidence from a natural experiment in Canada. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *82*(2), 534–549. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12661

About the Author

Zuzana Dančíková (PhD) is an LSE Fellow in gender, policy, and inequalities at the LSE Department of Gender Studies. Her research focuses on the intersection of gender, policy, family, and inequalities in Central Europe and beyond.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11201
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11201

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

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

Judit Durst [1,2]

[1] Department of Anthropology, University College London, UK
[2] ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Correspondence: Judit Durst (durst.judit@tk.hu)

Submitted: 25 August 2025 **Accepted:** 9 January 2026 **Published:** 24 March 2026

Issue: This article 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

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

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

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 Lápos, 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" (Nyírő, 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 Lápos 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 Lápos 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 Lápos, 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 Lápos, 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. Szőke 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. Karesz, 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. Karesz 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), Karesz 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.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the members of our two research project teams, especially Zsanna Nyírő, and all the interviewees who made this study possible. Special thanks go to the academic editors of this thematic issue (alongside the reviewers), whose insightful and constructive feedback contributed significantly to the strengthening of the argument and clarity of this article. I am also indebted to the thorough and careful copy-editing by Louise Chapman at Lex Academic.

Funding

Data analysis and the writing of the manuscript have been supported by two projects: (a) Social Mobility and Ethnicity: Trajectories, Outcomes and the Hidden Costs of High Educational Achievement (grant number K-125497) and (b) The Moral(itie)s of Dependent Relations in the Era of Financialization: Rethinking Dependence and Livelihood Among the Marginalised in Hungary (grant number K-146630). Both projects were funded by the National Research and Development Institute in Hungary. Publication of this article 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 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.

References

Archer, L. (2011). Constructing minority ethnic middle-class identity: An exploratory study with parents, pupils and young professionals. *Sociology*, *45*(1), 134–151. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510387187

Bárány, Z. (1998). Ethnic mobilization and the states: The Roma in Eastern Europe. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *21*(2), 308–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798330034

Boros, J. (2019). *Cigány, roma fiatalok életútja: egy iskolán kívüli esélynövelő tanodatípusú program tagjainak vizsgálata* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Pécs.

Boros, J., Bogdán, P., & Durst, J. (2021). Accumulating Roma cultural capital: First-in-family graduates and the role of educational talent support programs in Hungary in mitigating the price of social mobility. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *31*(3), 74–102. https://doi.org/10.51624/SzocSzemle.2021.3.4

Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2008). *Sketch for a self-analysis*. Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.

Brüggemann, C. (2014). Romani culture and academic success: Arguments against the belief in a contradiction. *Intercultural Education*, *25*(6), 439–452. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2014.990229

Burawoy, M. (1998). The extended case method. *Sociological Theory*, *16*(1), 4–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00040

Ceglédi, T. (2012). Reziliens életutak, avagy a hátrányok ellenére sikeresen kibontakozó iskolai karrier. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *22*(2), 85–110.

Chamberlain, M. (1999). Brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts: A lateral perspective on Caribbean families. In E. B. Silva & C. Smart (Eds.), *The new family* (pp. 129–142). Sage.

Coles, R. (2002). Black single fathers: Choosing to parent full time. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *31*(4), 411–439. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241602031004002

Connell, B. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity Press.

Csepeli, G., Fábián, Z., & Sik, E. (1998). Xenofóbia és a cigányságról alkotott vélemények. In T. Kolosi, I. G. Tóth, & G. Vukovich (Eds.), *Társadalmi riport 1998* (pp. 458–489). TÁRKI.

Dermott, E. (2003). The 'intimate father': Defining paternal involvement. *Sociological Research Online*, *8*(4), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.859

Dermott, E. (2008). *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*. Routledge.

Dermott, E., & Pomati, M. (2016). 'Good' parenting practices: How important are poverty, education and time pressure? *Sociology*, *50*(1), 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514560260

Dés, F. (2021). Costs of social mobility in the context of intimate partner relationships. 'It is really easy to be angry at someone who is in front of me and not at the system, which produces the inequalities between us.' *Szociológiai Szemle*, *31*(3), 51–73. https://doi.org/10.51624/SzocSzemle.2021.3.3

Dimitrova, R., Ferrer-Wreder, L., & Trost, J. (2015). Intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity and life satisfaction of Roma minority adolescents and their parents. *Journal of Adolescence*, *45*(1), 296–306. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.10.014

Durst, J. (2006). *Kirekesztettség és gyermekvállalás* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Corvinus University.

Durst, J., & Bereményi, Á. (2021). 'I felt I arrived home': The minority trajectory of mobility for first-in-family Hungarian Roma graduates. In M. M. Mendes, O. Magano, & S. Toma (Eds.), *Social and economic vulnerability of Roma people* (pp. 229–249). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52588-0_14

Edin, K., & Nelson, T. J. (2013). *Doing the best I can: Fatherhood in the inner city*. University of California Press.

Elliott, K. (2016). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *19*(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2025). Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024. https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2025/roma-survey-2024

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights & UNDP. (2012). The situation of Roma in 11 EU member states. Survey results at a glance. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/UNDP_Roma_Poverty_Reduction_Roma_Survey.pdf

Feischmidt, M., Szombati, K., & Szuhay, P. (2013). Collective criminalization of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Social causes, circumstances and consequences. In S. Gendrot, M. Hough, K. Kerezsi, R. Levy, & S. Snacken (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of European criminology* (pp. 168–187). Routledge.

Fleck, G., & Rughiniş, C. (2008). *Come closer: Inclusion and exclusion of Roma in present-day Romanian society*. Human Dynamics.

Fotta, M. (2016). 'They say he is a man now': A tale of fathers and sons. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *25*(2), 199–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1148020

Friedman, S. (2014). The price of the ticket: Rethinking the experience of social mobility. *Sociology*, *48*(2), 352–368. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038513490355

Friedman, S. (2016). Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility. *The Sociological Review*, *64*(1), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12280

Garaz, S., & Torotcoi, S. (2017). Increasing access to higher education and the reproduction of social inequalities: The Case of Roma University students in Eastern and Central Europe. *European Education*, *49*, 10–35.

Hablicsek, L., Hablicsekné Richter, M., & Lángi, T. (2019). A magyarországi romák népességszámának

prognózisa regionális szinten 2061-ig. *Competitio*, 18(1/2), 39–74. https://doi.org/10.21845/comp/2019/1-2/2

Hadas, M. (2001). Hímnem, többes szám. A férfikutatások első hulláma. *Replika*, *43/44*, 25–36.

Hanlon, N. (2012). *Masculinities, care and equality: Identity and nurture in men's lives*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hobson, B., & Morgan, D. (2002). Introduction: Making men into fathers. In B. Hobson (Ed.), *Making men into fathers: Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge University Press.

Hungarian Central Statistical Office. (2021). *A háztartások életszínvonala. A Roma népesség szegénységmutatói*. https://ksh.hu/s/helyzetkep-2021/#/kiadvany/a-haztartasok-eletszinvonala/a-roma-nepesseg-szegenysegmutatoi

Johansson, T., & Andreasson, P. (2017). *Fatherhood in transition. Masculinity, identity and everyday life*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jovanovic, D. (2025). The household and family as refuge? Relational dimensions of household debt management in an industrial town in Serbia. *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, *101*, 13–24. https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2025.1010102

Kóczé, A. (2025). Racism as common sense. The social legitimization of killing Roma. In Y. Takezawa, F. V. Harrison, & A. Tanabe (Eds.), *Visibilities and invisibilities of race and racism. Toward a new global dialogue* (pp. 112–130). Routledge.

Koslowski, A. (2011). Working fathers in Europe: Earning and caring. *European Sociological Review*, *27*(2), 230–245. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq004

Kovai, C. (2017). *A cigány-magyar különbségtétel és a rokonság*. L'Harmattan.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. University of California Press.

Makay, Z., & Spéder, Z. (2018). *Apaság: A férfiak gyerekvállalása és családi szerepei*. Demográfiai portré.

Messing, V. (2014). Methodological puzzles of surveying Roma/Gypsy populations. *Ethnicities*, *14*(6), 811–829. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796814542180

Miller, T. (2011). *Making sense of fatherhood: Caring, gender and work*. Cambridge University Press.

Morley, L., Mirga, A., & Redzepi, N. (2020). *The Roma in European higher education. Recasting identities, re-imagining futures*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Naudet, J. (2018). *Stepping into the elite. Trajectories of social achievement in India, France and the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Neckerman, K., Carter, P., & Lee, J. (1999). Segmented assimilation and minority cultures of mobility. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *22*(6) 945–965.

Nelson, T. J., Clampet-Lundquist, S., & Edin, K. (2002). Sustaining fragile fatherhood: Father involvement among low-income, noncustodial African American fathers in Philadelphia. In S. Catherine, C. Tamis-LeMonda, & N. Cabrera (Eds.), *A handbook of father involvement* (pp. 525–553). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Neumann, E. (2023). Education for a Christian nation: Religion and nationalism in the Hungarian education policy discourse. *European Educational Research Journal*, *22*(5), 646–665. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211072691

Nyírő, Z. (2022). *The effect of educational upward mobility on habitus—The subjective experience of mobility among first-in-family graduates in Hungary* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Corvinus University of Budapest.

Pénzes, J., Tátrai, P., & Pásztor, I. Z. (2018). A roma népesség területi megoszlásának változása Magyarországon az elmúlt évtizedekben. *Területi Statisztika*, *58*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.15196/TS580101

Peternel, L., & Maskalan, A. (2022). 'Keeping up with myself': Ethnography of a young adult woman in post-transitional Croatia. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, *31*(1), 12–32.

Radó, P. (2018). A közoktatás szelektivitása mint a roma szegregáció általános kontextusa. In B. Fejes & N. Szűcs (Eds.), *Én vétkem. Helyzetkép az oktatási szegregációról* (pp. 31–56). Motiváció Oktatási Egyesület.

Reay, D. (2005). Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology*, *39*(5), 911–928. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505058372

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *11*(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

Schwartz, S. J., Zamboanga, B. L., Weisskirch, R. S., & Rodriguez, L. (2009). The relationships of personal and ethnic exploration to indices of adaptive and maladaptive psychosocial functioning. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, *33*(2), 77–102. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0165025408098018

Sears, W., & Sears, M. (2001). *The attachment parenting book. A commonsense guide to understanding and nurturing your baby*. Little, Brown and Company.

Simonovits, B., & Szalai, B. (2013). Idegenellenesség és diszkrimináció a mai Magyarországon. *Magyar Tudomány*, *3*, 251–262.

Stack, C. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. Penguin Books.

Szőke, A. (2022). From the material to the emotional? Parenting ideals, social differentiation, and child welfare services in Hungary. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, *8*(3), 48–65. https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i3.877

Szőke, A., Kovai, C., & Geambasu, R. (2024). Settling for a 'good enough' school: Contradictions of middle class reproduction in a small town in illiberal Hungary. *Dialectical Anthropology*, *49*, 535–557. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09743-x

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Tremlett, A. (2009). Bringing hybridity to heterogeneity in Romani studies. *Romani Studies*, *19*(2), 147–168. https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2009.8

Vajda, R., & Dupcsik, C. (2008). *Country report on ethnic relations: Hungary*. EDUMIGROM.

Williams, R. A. (2009). Masculinities and fathering. *Community, Work & Family*, *12*(1), 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800802133784

About the Author



Judit Durst (PhD) is a sociologist, a social anthropologist, an hon. research fellow at the University College London, UK, in the Department of Anthropology, and a senior researcher at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences. Her research focus is on social inequalities, marginalisation, educational, social, and geographical mobility, reproductive decision-making, economic anthropology, and household financialisation. She has led the research project Social Mobility and Ethnicity: Trajectories, Outcomes and the Hidden Costs of High Educational Achievement. She is currently the PI of the national research project The Moral(itie)s of Dependent Relations in the Era of Financialization: Rethinking Dependence and Livelihood Among the Marginalised in Hungary. She has published several academic papers and book chapters.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10878
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10878

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Becoming a "Good" Father in the Context of Czech Social Work

Barbora Gřundělová and Jiří Mertl

Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic

Correspondence: Barbora Gřundělová (barbora.grundelova@osu.cz)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 16 December 2025 **Published:** 21 January 2026

Issue: This article 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 article explores how fatherhood is experienced by the clients of Czech family social workers, paying particular attention to how class, ethnic, and gender inequalities shape these experiences. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 11 fathers, the study employs a critical, intersectional, and structural social work perspective to analyse fathers' narratives about their paternal identities and everyday lives. The findings reveal that fatherhood is constructed and negotiated within systemic constraints, such as insecure housing, precarious labour, and institutionalised gender norms. Fathers strive to embody the ideals of the "good" father, typically defined through breadwinning, but their efforts are undermined by structural exclusion and stigma. The study argues that paternal identity in contexts of social exclusion must be understood not as an individual trait, but as a politically and institutionally shaped phenomenon.

Keywords

fatherhood; housing; poverty; social exclusion; social work

1. Introduction

Research in social work has increasingly focused on the intersectionality of social identities and categories that can create specific forms of disadvantage (Broskevičová, 2025). This perspective is also highly relevant for studies on father involvement, which is deeply shaped by class, racial, and gender inequalities. Despite the growing number of studies addressing fathers in diverse sociocultural contexts (Charles et al., 2021; Chuang & Fagan, 2021), scholars emphasise the need for more inclusive theories capable of addressing the complexities of fatherhood, particularly among non-hegemonic and marginalised groups of fathers (Strier & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021).

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

In the Czech context, there are several quantitative studies (e.g., Klusáček & Kalenda, 2024; Prokop, 2022) that emphasise factors influencing the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality, but there is a significant lack of qualitative studies examining the life experiences of inequality and their impact on parenting. These marginalised group experiences should be recognised as one of the key sources of knowledge in social work, as they provide unique insights into power structures (Broskevičová, 2025). At the same time, these experiences, especially those of fathers, are still often under-researched, while the experiences of social workers are well known and documented.

Our study, therefore, focuses on the life experiences of fathers in the context of Czech social work, with the analytical objective of understanding how fatherhood is experienced by social service clients and how class, ethnic, and gender inequalities shape this experience. We ask ourselves the following research questions:

1. How do social services clients perceive their paternal identity?
2. How does the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, and gender inequalities shape fathers' involvement and engagement?

To achieve this goal, we first delineate the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study, with particular emphasis on the social construction of fatherhood and parental participation/involvement within the context of Czech social work, viewed through the lens of ambivalent sexism. The article then outlines the qualitative research design, based on interviews with fathers who are clients of family social services. The following section presents a detailed analysis of the findings, organised around three principal themes. The concluding section considers the implications of these findings for the theory and practice of social work and proposes avenues for future research.

2. The Social Construction of Fatherhood in the Context of Social Work

Parenting is a socially constructed role shaped by gender norms and expectations (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998; Pedersen, 2012). These expectations are embedded in broader gender regimes (Connell, 2000) that define acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity and legitimise specific family patterns. Within these regimes, fatherhood has historically been associated with the breadwinner role, while caregiving has been constructed as a feminine domain. Such understandings are not universal, but socially produced and maintained through institutions, including social work.

In the Czech context, studies show that parenthood continues to be framed by hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Hašková, 2022; Šmídová, 2008). Czech social work reflects this environment, relying on traditional gender divisions in the family, with mothers viewed as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners (Janebová & Černá, 2008; Lyócsa, 2011). Consequently, social work practice tends to focus more on mothers (Dominelli et al., 2011; Philip et al., 2019), a pattern reinforced by the feminisation of the profession. As a result, interventions and services are often mother-based (Ghate et al., 2000), which can lead both to the blaming of mothers (Caplan, 2007; Davies & Krane, 2006; Reimer & Sahagian, 2015) and to the marginalisation or demonisation of fathers (Baum, 2017; Clapton, 2009; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015).

At the same time, neoliberal ideologies and patriarchal structures shape the way parenting is problematised. Structural inequalities, such as poverty or housing insecurity, are frequently individualised as "parenting

deficits" (Olszowy et al., 2020; Reimer & Sahagian, 2015). These discourses obscure the systemic conditions that constrain both mothers and fathers and sustain gendered inequalities in parenting.

Recent scholarship has underscored the need to expand understandings of fatherhood beyond the narrow model of the breadwinner (Randles, 2018; Scheibling, 2020). Although fatherhood is multidimensional and includes social and emotional care, the dominant ideals of "good" fatherhood often reflect the experiences of privileged middle-class heterosexual fathers (Strier & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021). Recognising the diversity of fathering practices that exists beyond the dominant ideals is essential for social work, which must move towards more inclusive constructions of fatherhood and greater engagement of fathers across different social contexts.

3. Parental Involvement/Engagement in Social Work Through the Lens of Ambivalent Sexism

Parental involvement/engagement is a multifaceted concept that has been defined and applied in various ways (Day & Lamb, 2004). In the literature, the distinction between father involvement and father engagement is often blurred, and both terms are used to describe fathers' participation in their children's lives or in child welfare cases (e.g., Clapton, 2009; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Y. Lee et al., 2018). In this study, we follow the view that father engagement/involvement is the full range of ways in which fathers can be included in their children's cases, or lives. This continuum captures different degrees and forms of fathers' participation in family support processes, from passive involvement (e.g., being available or maintaining contact) to active engagement (e.g., initiating, co-producing, and interacting within the care process; Lamb et al., 1987; McMunn et al., 2015). At the same time, differentiating between involvement and engagement is analytically useful, as cultural and gender expectations may influence whether fathers remain in more passive or more active positions.

With this conceptualisation in mind, we then employ ambivalent sexism as the main theoretical lens through which we will perceive involvement/engagement of fathers. The findings on power relations and gender constructions in family social work indicate that the concept of ambivalent sexism is one of the significant factors related to the level of involvement/engagement of fathers and mothers (Brewsaugh et al., 2018). In social work, parents are constructed as "good" or "bad, embodying the positive and negative aspects of sexist ambivalence (Gřundělová et al., 2023). The theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001, 2011) describes how the justification of women's roles as caregivers and educators and men's roles as incompetent in family life serves to maintain the status quo. Based on this, social workers emphasise stereotypically positive traits of women that are consistent with their subordinate role (e.g., caring, responsible, open to help, communicative, submissive, emotional, helpless, etc.), while simultaneously allowing them to demonise or marginalise men without directly challenging male dominance (T. L. Lee et al., 2010).

All three components of ambivalent sexism (paternalism, gender differentiation, and heteronormativity) are distinctly manifested in the field of family social work. Paternalism is reflected in the perception of men as the ultimate authority within the family, expected to have the final say. Gender differentiation emerges from the widespread assumption that men are more rational and self-reliant than women (Gřundělová, 2018). In line with this, Eagly and Crowley (1986) demonstrated that women are more often perceived as in need of

help and, consequently, are more likely to receive it than men, which reinforces the notion of gender roles as functionally distinct. Finally, heteronormativity surfaces in the uncritical idealisation of the white, middle-class, nuclear family, where social workers often fail to adequately recognise the diversity of family structures or to question this model in terms of ethnicity or social class (Nedbálková, 2011). Social workers' attitudes towards fathers' involvement are to some extent shaped by their personal experiences (Cryer-Coupet et al., 2021). The social workers' unexamined projections of personal experiences, values, and norms (often rooted in white middle-class backgrounds) can be reflected in the assessment and categorisation of marginalised clients (e.g., "good/bad" mother, "good/bad" father). Based on these gender constructions, social workers tend to apply different normative measures to mothers and fathers.

Diverse findings suggest that fathers, like mothers, are not a monolithic group composed solely of risks or benefits to their children (e.g., Douglas, 2017). Centring interventions around mothers ignores the potential benefits, as well as the risks, that fathers can bring to social work with families (Brewsaugh et al., 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to avoid binary thinking in assessing fathers as "risks" or "resources" and instead move toward a more holistic assessment of family situations (Philip et al., 2019), taking into account the structural context that causes social problems for families with children. This is because poverty, ethnicity, and culture are just some of the factors that can prevent fathers from being involved in addressing the family's situation (Coakley et al., 2014). This means that, when working with families, social workers should consider the broader context of their functionality as a unit, and reflect on the risk that the norm of a "good father" will become a new pressure or standard that condemns or marginalises those who cannot fulfil it (e.g., for time, health, or economic reasons).

For this reason, we will place greater emphasis on the structural level in this study. The structural level of father involvement/engagement refers to systemic conditions (socio-political, economic, institutional) that not only reflect but also actively reproduce inequalities in social work practice (Thompson, 2020). These systemic inequalities are institutionally embedded disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and power that are produced and reproduced by policies, institutions, and social practices—not merely by individual actions (Braveman et al., 2022). In this study, we therefore draw on structural social work theory, which emphasises that the causes of clients' problems often lie not in individual deficits, but in macrostructural factors such as social policies, class relations, and institutionalised practices (Mullaly, 1993; Weinberg, 2008). This perspective directs attention to the ways in which social work practice responds to and reproduces social structures and inequalities. Complementarily, anti-oppressive practice seeks to challenge and transform those structures by addressing power imbalances and striving for social justice and institutional change (Dominelli, 2002). Finally, we integrate an intersectional perspective, which highlights how overlapping systems of oppression (such as gender, class, race, etc.) interact to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Together, these frameworks provide a critical lens for analysing how systemic and institutional conditions shape father involvement and engagement within social work practice.

4. Methodology

The data used in this article come from a larger research project titled Development of Tools to Support Fathers' Involvement in Social Activation Services for Families With Children and Their Pilot Verification in Practice. The project aimed to design and pilot instruments that improve fathers' involvement/engagement

in social activation services for families with children. It was funded by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic (grant no. TJ04000152) and carried out between August 2020 and July 2022. The methodological design involved qualitative and quantitative methods. Data generation included maps of social worlds and arenas, focus groups, in-depth interviews with social workers and clients of family social services, a World Café discussion, and a questionnaire administered to social workers.

As previously stated, this article seeks to understand how social service clients experience fatherhood and how this experience is shaped by class, ethnic, and gender inequalities, asking the following research questions: How do social service clients perceive their paternal identity? And how does the intersectionality of class, ethnic, and gender inequalities play a role in fathers' engagement/involvement? We base our analysis on semi-structured interviews with fathers who are currently social service clients.

4.1. Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit parents through NGOs providing social services for families. Social workers from the selected services based in two Czech regions provided the research group with contact information of their clients who are fathers. Based on these contacts, the researcher made contact with the fathers and arranged meetings at their place of residence. In some cases, the social workers accompanied the researcher to the father's home, while in other cases the fathers came to the service organisation where the researcher was waiting. Field research was carried out between August 2020 and April 2021. Interviews with fathers were carried out by a researcher who identifies as a male, white, middle-class father. The average duration of the interview was 35 minutes. The informants were mainly middle-aged men, most often biological fathers or grandfathers, with primary education or vocational training, who predominantly identified themselves as Roma. All names and data that could lead to the identification of informants were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used. An overview of the participants is provided in the Table 1.

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Fatherhood	Education	Occupation	Number of children
Jáchym	34	Roma	biological father	primary	burner	4
Radovan	34	Roma	biological father	primary	temporary jobs	9
Kazimír	57	Roma	grandfather	vocational training	manual worker	3
Alex	62	Roma	grandfather	vocational training	painter, varnisher	3
Albert	33	Roma	biological father	primary	temporary jobs	5
Robert	41	Ethnic majority (Czech)	biological father	vocational training	locksmith, manual worker	3
František	55	Roma	grandfather	primary	digger	7
Martin	29	Roma	biological father	primary	self-employed	4
Hugo	37	Roma	biological father	primary	unemployed	4
Jonáš	34	Ethnic majority (Czech)	biological father	vocational training	self-employed	1
Otmar	37	Ethnic majority (Czech)	(non-) biological father	vocational training	security guard/ disability pensioner	2

4.2. Positionality and Reflexivity of the Researchers

To situate our analysis, it is important to acknowledge the structural and positional conditions under which this research was conducted. The study is informed by a critical social work perspective, which recognises that knowledge production is never neutral but is shaped by the social locations and institutional contexts of the researchers (Fook, 2002). The authors identify themselves as a white woman and a white man from middle-class backgrounds, both social workers and academics based in the Czech Republic. These positionalities inevitably influence how we perceive and interpret issues of fatherhood, gender, and inequality. Our social positions carry certain privileges. By making these pre-existing structural conditions explicit, we aim to enhance the transparency and reflexivity of the study and to situate our findings within the broader socio-political and institutional context in which we, and our participants, are embedded (Dominelli, 2002).

4.3. Statement of Ethics

The study was reviewed and subsequently approved by the ethics committee of the authors' institution. We also took into account the power dynamics that may have influenced the participants' perception of the researchers. Through informed consent, we ensured that participants who may have felt vulnerable did not feel like they would be either advantaged or disadvantaged by participating in the research or refusing to do so (Littlechild, 2014). Participants were assured of anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study. They were also assured that this decision would not affect the services they received.

4.4. Data Analysis

We worked with verbatim transcripts that were coded using the MAXQDA software. Coding was methodologically guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which puts an emphasis on inductive coding and creative construction of themes from the codes. We then employed inductive coding and coded the whole data corpus, creating numerous codes on the same level. In the next stage, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend construing the initial themes from the list of codes, so as not to confuse themes with categories. Due to the number of codes, we did both, that is, we created initial themes that caught our attention and categorised related codes to get a better grasp. In this phase, we observed how father-informants relate to fatherhood and how they perceive their fatherhood in relation to systemic barriers. Thus, we started exploring these themes more thoroughly, selecting relevant codes, and incorporating them into the themes. At this stage, we also formulated research questions to better guide our analysis. In accordance with the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2022), in the next phase, we started to specify, elaborate, and conceptualise the themes relevant to this study so that the themes would contain a story that could be told. At the same time, we gave the themes illustrative as well as attractive names. In the end, we came up with three themes related to the research questions, which are presented below.

4.5. Limitations

A major limitation of this study concerns the composition and scope of the sample. The research was conducted primarily with Romani fathers of marginalised families who were, to varying degrees, in contact with social services. Consequently, the data reflect the experiences and perspectives of fathers who have

already been engaged (willingly or out of necessity) in institutional systems of support and control. We did not include non-resident fathers and those who actively avoid contact with social workers. These groups of fathers could have given a broader range of insights, but they are difficult to reach.

Furthermore, the sample was relatively homogeneous in several respects (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and geographical context), which may have shaped both the thematic focus and interpretive boundaries of our analysis. For example, there was minimal geographic variability, so it is possible that fathers from other parts of the Czech Republic experienced or perceived their role differently. The same applies to differences between mothers and fathers, resident and non-resident parents, or urban and rural contexts. Greater variability could have revealed additional dimensions and nuances of parental involvement/engagement, role perceptions, and structural inequality.

Despite these limits, we believe that the study provides important insight into how structural and cultural inequalities are perceived and negotiated in daily life. These voices remain under-represented in both research and social work discourses, and amplifying them may help inform more equitable and culturally responsive social work practices.

5. Findings

This section presents the main findings of our research on fatherhood in the context of social work. The analysis is structured around three interrelated themes: preparedness for fatherhood, housing as a prerequisite for parental recognition, and the tension between breadwinning and caregiving. The fathers' narratives reveal how structural barriers intersect with the cultural expectations of "good" fatherhood, thereby shaping their daily struggles and strategies. Together, these findings highlight how paternal identities are continuously negotiated at the intersection of personal responsibility, systemic exclusion, and institutional practices.

5.1. Preparedness for Fatherhood: Between the Personal and the Political in the Child Welfare System

The theme of preparedness for the paternal role was a recurring theme in the fathers' narratives. The informants reported that a key factor in managing the paternal role was the environment in which they grew up. Many pointed out that becoming a good father is not innate, but shaped by socialisation in the family or in institutional care. Many fathers came from children's homes, and the difference between family and institutional upbringing was frequently discussed. Alex's quote suggests that "good" fatherhood is related to "good" upbringing and leading to independence, which, according to him, institutional upbringing can, somewhat paradoxically, offer to future fathers:

> These are fathers who were raised by the state, it really comes down to upbringing and especially independence…fathers who were raised well, maybe lived in an institution…they went to secondary school, then served in the army, and learned independence. So, he already knew that if the woman failed, he would be able to take care of the child himself. (Alex, Roma, 62)

Interestingly, while institutional care is sometimes considered inadequate by social workers in preparing girls for motherhood (Kempe, 2025), Alex sees it as a form of "school of independence" that prepared them for fatherhood better than an upbringing in a dysfunctional family. This highlights how being a "good" parent can

be perceived in a gender-differentiated way in relation to past experiences. A certain level of independence is important for the father role, which men are expected to have already learnt as boys. For girls, the opportunity to learn the maternal role by mimicking their mothers in the family is considered important. Previous research (Gřundělová, 2018; Gřundělová et al., 2023) also shows that women are considered responsible at the time they become mothers, because in the constructs of many social workers, becoming a mother implies that a woman must assume full responsibility for the child.

Some of the interviewed fathers also considered family history and personal experience with caring in the family crucial in preparing for fatherhood. Albert argued that the environment in which he grew up provided the foundation for being able to care not only for himself but later for his own children. At the same time, he acknowledged that this was not a common practice and could also be related to the fact that he had only two siblings, unlike many other Roma families. His parents (meaning his mother) therefore had more time to spend with him and could pay more attention to him. However, his paternal engagement only began when his wife had become ill and was unable to take care of their children:

> Well, nobody chose that illness [the one my wife had]. And the kids are mine, so someone has to take care of them….I know it's not typical, but it's just the way I've always been. My parents taught me that…discipline. Three children, so there weren't too many of us, and we took care of each other….Our mum didn't have any problems with us. (Albert, Roma, 33)

However, at the same time, he also admits that he relies on his wife when it comes to household chores. In doing so, Albert reflects the persistent notion that housekeeping is "naturally feminine": "I just don't know how to do laundry—like, I can throw things in the washing machine, but I often stain them. A woman just has it in her, she knows what goes in there."

The experience of "upbringing" in fathers' narratives is not limited to childhood, but is related to the political and institutional production of parental subjectivity, which varies according to gender, class status, and life circumstances. The claim "the personal is political" is given a concrete meaning here: The ability to care for children is not just an individual skill, but the result of socio-economic conditions, the availability of care, and gender-related expectations. This preparedness was tested most intensely in situations where mothers were temporarily indisposed. In such moments, fathers became more visible to social workers, but this was not perceived as an offer of support, but rather as a form of control:

> Then we worked with another [social worker]….When my wife was in a hospital, I was left alone with the little one here for three days before she was discharged. That was like feeding, changing nappies, and so on…and I had never done that before….Mainly the checking if everything was okay, if the baby was okay. (Jonáš, ethnic majority, 34)

At the same time, fathers described situations in which, due to the need to provide for their families and the lack of support, they had resorted to the temporary removal of their children. Instead of receiving support from the system, they faced decisions that questioned their parenting skills and economic pressure that forced them to choose between childcare and earning a living: "It was just too much for me, like five [kids] on one. And one of them was a newborn….Like I agreed to it [the removal of the children] because it'd make my life easier…the social workers suggested it" (Albert, Roma, 33).

The stereotypical presumption that women are the ones who should ask for help and arrange social benefits for the family is embedded in both families and systemic settings, leading to absurd situations in practice. Albert aptly described how this can complicate the life of the entire family:

> My wife was in the hospital for about a year, and before that, all the benefits were in her name. I didn't have access to that money, so I couldn't pay the rent for our flat at the time, so I had to leave.

Living in an environment of social exclusion, which creates both practical barriers (e.g., poor-quality housing, poverty) and symbolic stigma that questions fathers' parenthood based on their social status, plays a crucial role in preparation for fatherhood. Fathers point out that the conditions in their localities are so disadvantageous that the possibility of engaged parenting is structurally limited:

> But I can tell you that in another region…it'd be easier and maybe even quicker to solve the problem…here it's quite complicated. (Alex, Roma, 62)

> It's hard for these people…the kids go to school unprepared, there's no electricity and light in their homes. (Martin, Roma, 29)

The theme of preparedness for fatherhood and parenting in general cannot be separated from the broader context of the social exclusion cycle (Wacquant, 2009). The accounts of the fathers reveal that exclusion is not simply a matter of the present moment, but a long-term structural condition that is passed down from generation to generation (Broskevičová, 2025). A lack of opportunities, recurrent institutional failure, and stigmatisation by society create an environment in which the pursuit of a "better life" is often limited:

> This is how these kids grow up—if only someone supported them. I don't know if it's them or if the state is forcing them to live like this. I don't know….Every father and every mother wants the best for their child, but it's not possible because they don't have that chance. (Martin, Roma, 29)

These accounts show that preparation for fatherhood cannot be understood as a solely individual matter. It is the result of a combination of personal experiences and institutional practices that determine who is perceived as a "good" parent. The issue of fatherhood thus becomes a political one. It is shaped by class, gender, and ethnic structures that affect not only fathers' capacity to care, but also whether the care they give is recognised and supported. The cycle of social exclusion is manifested not only materially, but also in a deeply rooted sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis a system that is perceived not as a source of support, but as a form of surveillance and control. Despite the institutional claims of commitment to supporting these fathers, no real progress has been made. Families remain trapped in an environment of structural discrimination, where even following the "rules of the system" is no guarantee of improving their life situation.

5.2. Housing as the Main Precondition for "Good" Fatherhood

Almost all informants identified housing as their main difficulty in life. Housing is not only a prerequisite for childcare, but is also often a condition for official recognition of that care, as its absence is often a reason for the removal of children from parental custody: "To get out of here….To leave this place, to find a nice flat, with a garden, but I know all the doors are closed to me" (Radovan, Roma, 34).

Fathers encounter numerous structural barriers when searching for housing: discrimination in the housing market (particularly based on ethnicity), extremely short-term rental agreements (one to three months), poor physical conditions of the flats, evictions, excessive rents, and the practices of landlords (or rather of slumlords; see also Kupka et al., 2021):

> And they say that the Roma have to go. And I'm white, but my wife is Roma. I have to hide her in the pantry. [Laughs] Well, the landlord….That's practically all owned by H. [a development company], but they renovated the settlement. There can only be whites and maybe one or two [Roma] who already had a contract. (Robert, ethnic majority, 41)

Although securing housing is often the main task of fathers in their collaboration with social workers, many of them encounter institutional barriers and the powerlessness of workers who do not have the mandate or the tools to realistically help with housing:

> She helps me fill out [forms] that I'm applying for that place on XY street, but nothing at all comes of it. She [the social worker]…it's not her fault. They [officials] are there for that, but still nothing happens. (Jáchym, Roma, 34)

The inability to find adequate housing triggered many negative feelings among informants. Some of them spoke out strongly the moment they started talking about their housing hardships. Their agitation and fears were evident in the interviews. Unfortunately, the threat of losing their home is not uncommon among families living in social exclusion. Martin described his feelings about concerns for his children as follows:

> We tried our best to find a house, so that we could somehow make it in time [before they throw us out of the flat], so that the kids wouldn't end up on the street. It's just such a strange feeling. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, because you don't know where to go. You basically become homeless from one day to the next. The kids too, because wherever you go, they go with you. It's an ugly feeling. (Martin, Roma, 29)

Fathers thematised housing primarily from the perspective of their children. They cited the need for security, privacy for their teenagers, a more suitable environment for schooling, and the desire to get away from an environment with negative influences. The provision of housing can be seen here as a concrete manifestation of paternal care and responsibility, which they cannot adequately fulfil due to systemic barriers. Martin mentions one of many such barriers (overcrowding in small apartments):

> Then in the morning she gets up for school, and she's not ready. It would be better to have a bigger flat where the child has her privacy. She won't study properly from a young age, and then she'll grow up, and what will become of her? (Martin, Roma, 29)

Paradoxically, apart from ethnicity, children are a common reason why landlords do not want to rent a property to families. Open discrimination is a common practice everyone knows about, but no one does anything because landlords are favoured by legislation, and any legal action is expensive and lengthy:

> We called the numbers of the landlords and their very first question was always: How many children do you have? Well, four. Well, we're sorry. And what kind of family are you? Roma. We don't want Roma,

> and because you have so many children, we don't want you either. The next number was the same story (Martin, Roma, 29)

This effort goes against a profound sense of injustice. Our informants did not understand why they could not get better housing, even though they met all the socially required norms: They worked, had no debt, and behaved "properly." From their perspective, they met all the attributes of a "good" citizen and father. Instead of receiving support, however, they received rejection and silence from the institutions:

> We have been paying properly for seven years…we have no debt. And they still won't let us change flats [raised voice]. (Hugo, Roma, 37).

> I have a work contract, I have no debt…and still it's always "wait"…no answer, no message. (Jáchym, Roma, 34)

The frustration from this approach is further deepened by the individualisation of responsibility, with failure attributed to the individual rather than to systemic barriers. Although fathers strive to provide a better environment for their children, they remain stigmatised as irresponsible: "We take care of the place; we clean so that it's nice and tidy. And what do they do? 'Gypsies live here, so f…ck them.' That's how they deal with it…" (Hugo, Roma, 37).

In the context of Czech society, which has the least accessible housing in the EU and one of the highest wealth inequalities in Europe (Lux & Sunega, 2023), it comes as no surprise that housing is becoming a key intersection where parenthood, poverty, ethnicity, and structural violence intertwine. The housing issue is not merely a technical matter, but a deeply political space in which decisions are made about who has the right to be a "good" parent (father).

Insecure housing leads to frequent relocations. This has negative effects on children's education and disrupts local neighbourhood ties and the loss of social capital, which again contributes to a further cycle of social exclusion. This destabilisation of relationships and ties is often associated with school absenteeism among children. The consequences fall then mainly on parents, who are perceived as irresponsible and neglectful. As a result, they may face fines, cuts to part of their welfare benefits, or even imprisonment (Mertl et al., 2025):

> But it's crazy. I've made some acquaintances here, and now again we need to move into something else [a different flat]?...And I'll end up somewhere completely different, where nobody knows me. Here I know them all. (Robert, ethnic majority, 41)

From the perspective of our informants, it appears that housing is not only a material condition, but also a key symbol of "good fatherhood." Fathers describe their efforts to provide their children with a safe and stable home as a fundamental expression of care, responsibility, and parental competence. At the same time, however, they face structural barriers (discrimination, short-term contracts, insufficient institutional support) that fundamentally limit and often delegitimise their fatherhood. In the context of Czech social work, being a "good father" paradoxically does not only mean fulfilling parental norms, but above all, overcoming systemic obstacles that prevent them from exercising their fatherhood at all. Housing, therefore, becomes not only

a basic prerequisite for parenthood, but also a political field where decisions are made about who can be recognised as a good father and who will remain stigmatised as a failure.

5.3. "Good" Fatherhood: Between Breadwinning and Care

The theme of work emerges in fathers' narratives as a key element of paternal identity (the father as a provider), but also as a source of deep tension and failure. Earning is closely related to the issues of housing, dignity, and the ability to provide for children, and is thus integral to the idea of a "good father." However, in conditions of structural exclusion, this effort often clashes with the reality of the grey economy and precarious working conditions, which at times make it impossible to fulfil the breadwinner role without difficulties: "It wouldn't be about the rent….The worst part would be if I got a regular job with a contract, then the debt collectors would come after me." (Jonáš, ethnic majority, 34).

Illegal or seasonal work is a necessity, not a choice, in these conditions. Fathers work in unstable, physically demanding occupations with 12-hour shifts, often six days a week. The long commute times and the irregular nature of work contribute to their prolonged absence from home. They are often "invisible" to social workers.

Testimonies from fathers suggest that illegal work is an "open secret," perceived as a way to provide for the family. Social workers know about it, but tolerate and accept it because they understand the insustainability of a system in which legal work and employment mean falling into foreclosure or losing welfare benefits. The welfare system is no longer seen as a tool of social protection or inclusion in the labour market, but has become a tool of ethnic hierarchisation (see also Trlifajová & Pospíšil, 2023):

> That kind of thing, you don't say out loud that you work under the table, because you'd lose your benefits. But everybody knows. The only ones who don't know are the ones who pay me [the benefits]….They don't know, but the probation officer for the kids, the social worker, they all know I work. I'm not going to hide it. I need the money, I can't make ends meet with what they [the state] give me. (Albert, Roma, 33)

Poverty is a permanent reality in these families, putting the father in the position of constantly balancing income and care. Expenses for rent, school supplies, and the normal costs of living exceed their income, forcing them to continue working at the expense of time with their children:

> Mostly from the benefits that we get, but….I pay the rent, right, and then what? I go do odd jobs, I bring in some money…for school, something for the kids, things, clothes for them to have what they need, and such. Sometimes it's still not enough, you know. (Radovan, Roma, 34)

Specific working hours (12-hour shifts, weekend work) make it difficult for fathers to be involved in family life. In addition, they are not home even when social workers visit, which is one of the main stated reasons why services are mainly focused on mothers: "I'm on sick leave now, so I've got more time for the kids, but usually not, because I work twelve-hour shifts" (Jáchym, Roma, 34).

This time, the mismatch between clients and social workers is further reinforced by the feminisation of the social work profession. Social workers often care for their own children and visit families only during the

morning hours. As a result, fathers remain out of reach of services that adapt their working hours to the lives of caring women rather than those of working men:

> So, when I have time, I go there with her, it's just that their meeting is around ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, and I'm at work then, so I can't just tell work that I'm leaving to go there. (Jonáš, ethnic majority, 34)

This situation creates a vicious cycle of structural exclusion, where fathers who strive to fulfil their parental responsibilities through work lose access to other forms of support because they are not available during working hours. They are excluded from the institutionalised notion of active parenthood because they are not visible, do not cooperate "on time," and do not fit existing social work time regimes.

Through this lens, the fatherhood of marginalised men is construed as failing. Not because fathers fail to care or have interest, but because the system does not allow them to be present in ways that are considered legitimate. Work, which should be a means of responsible parenthood, becomes an obstacle to cooperation with a system that, moreover, views working poverty not as a structural problem but as an individual failure.

The breadwinner model can be very hurtful for marginalised men, as precarious work, poverty, or job loss means that the role of breadwinner cannot be fulfilled in a stable and secure way, ultimately impacting their children. The following quote illustrates that fathers are confronted with a dilemma that is not usually addressed in mainstream discourse—economic necessity vs emotional commitment:

> I was with the kids, and I didn't know what to do mentally…whether I should go to work or stay at home with them, so I chose one….I took care of the kids; they're my kids. I cooked, cleaned, did the laundry, and even prepared milk for my baby girl, changed nappies, and bathed the kids. I got them ready for school, took them there in the morning, and picked them up after lunch. (Martin, Roma, 29)

The narratives of the fathers further show that their parental identity is firmly rooted in a traditional gender division of family roles, which defines men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. This model corresponds to the hegemonic notion of masculinity as described by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), where the "proper" man contributes economically to the family, while emotional and everyday childcare remains the "natural" responsibility of the woman: "I take care of the work and money, and my partner takes care of our children" (Radovan, Roma, 34).

However, this normative framework is simultaneously disrupted by everyday reality that challenges the traditional model. Fathers acknowledge that maternal care is not always automatic or unconditional and that the mother's role itself is not naturally fulfilled, but, just like fatherhood, it is shaped by education, motivation, and structural context: "It's usually up to the mother, but some mothers are backward, some are illiterate….They don't do it out of love, but because they must" (Alex, Roma, 62).

Despite the prevailing norms, stereotypical gender role divisions within the family are increasingly disrupted, particularly in situations where the family's economic situation requires a second income:

> Now, thanks to L. [wife] working morning shifts, I've started to get more involved, so I take kids to kindergarten…and I try to help around with household chores, but after all, the woman should be the

> one who is cleaning and all that, while the man should be earning, but….I'm trying. (Otmar, ethnic majority, 37)

However, a caregiving father is perceived differently from a mother in the context of social work. The care provided by women is taken for granted, while the care provided by men is valued and exceptional. Also, fathers themselves often talk about household activities as a hobby or a voluntary activity rather than an expected responsibility: "I can do everything. Cook, clean, do the laundry, everything. There's no problem with me in this respect [laughs]….I enjoy it. If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't do it. But it's my hobby" (Hugo, Roma, 37).

Thus, work–family balance concerns not only women but also men. Although in conditions of precarious work, low wages, and poverty, parents' choices are quite limited: "She would need to find a four-hour job….To get my wife somewhere to work for four hours starting in November" (Robert, ethnic majority, 41).

Time spent together with children is an important element of paternal identity, even if it is mainly spent after work or at weekends. Here, caregiving is associated with play and closeness, dimensions that are neither systemically supported nor measured as "parental competence" yet are central to the father-child relationship and are generally very important for the child's development (see also Maté & Maté, 2022):

> When I come home from work, the kids come to me all the time. They lie down with me, want me to put on a cartoon, and they watch it with me. (František, Roma, 55)

> So, we bought him some plastic building blocks too, and I was building it with them. We made a garage, blocks, houses. (Otmar, ethnic majority, 37)

In terms of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989), it is important to understand that the gender division of roles in the family is not universal. In structurally excluded communities, it is shaped by class, ethnicity, and access to resources. Fathers of marginalised families often strive to fill the role of "breadwinner," but their economic reality does not fully allow them to do so. For them, fatherhood means balancing between normative expectations and the structural impossibility of fulfilling them. In doing so, they experience the phenomenon that Young (1999) metaphorised as a bulimic society characterised by cultural inclusion (fathers know what is expected of them and have internalised it) and structural exclusion (they are unable to fulfil this expectation). Fathers are thus constantly culturally consumed but structurally rejected, creating tension and frustration. In this light, the traditional division of labour is not a result of personal choice but rather a survival strategy under conditions of uncertainty, where families flexibly rearrange roles depending on who can work at a given time, who has a work contract, or who is sick at the time. Parenting roles are thus becoming hybrid, but the social service system has been slow to respond to this dynamic, still favouring mothers as primary caregivers (Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023).

6. Concluding Discussion

In this study, we set ourselves the goal of understanding how fatherhood is experienced by social service clients and how class, ethnic, and gender inequalities shape this experience. We specifically focused on two research questions:

1. How do social services clients perceive their paternal identity?
2. How does the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, and gender inequalities shape fathers' involvement and engagement?

Our findings demonstrate that fatherhood in the contexts of social work is not only a personal matter but also an inherently political one. Paternal identity emerges in narratives as a negotiation between the normative ideals of the "good father" and the structural barriers that limit the ability of fathers to enact these ideals.

As we have shown, fathers perceive themselves primarily through the lens of responsibility, most often tied to the breadwinner role. For many, recognition as a "good father" is equated with financial support for the family, while care and household responsibilities remain framed as secondary or situational activity, often only when the mother is absent due to illness or other reasons. This resonates with previous research showing that men's path to "responsible fatherhood" is linked to independence and external socialisation (Hong et al., 2021), while women are assumed to become responsible by virtue of childbirth itself (Gřundělová, 2018). Yet, the structural realities of precarious labour, insecure housing, and ethnic discrimination make the breadwinner role extremely fragile and often unattainable, resulting in stigma and feelings of failure (Broskevičová, 2025; Janebová, 2020).

The intersections of class, gender, and ethnicity are central to understanding these dynamics. Fathers in marginalised communities face systemic housing discrimination, unstable employment, and welfare regimes that privilege mothers as primary clients (Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023). These conditions render their fatherhood invisible or undervalued within institutional frameworks, despite their efforts to provide for and engage with their children. As we have presented, fatherly involvement is frequently situational and emerges in response to crises, while routine engagement is constrained by systemic conditions. Consequently, social services interpret this situational engagement through a lens of control rather than support.

The narratives also reveal that the hegemonic models of masculinity and family continue to shape expectations. Fathers strive to fulfil provider roles, yet their realities place them at the margins of legitimacy. Ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2011) operates here in two ways: Fathers' failure to provide is stigmatised, while their involvement in care is considered exceptional, valued only when it occurs in extraordinary circumstances. Feminised social services, organised around the schedules and needs of mothers, further contribute to the invisibility of fathers (Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Strega et al., 2009). This creates a vicious cycle where fathers' structural exclusion is reproduced through institutional practice.

Following our analytical objective, we can conclude that fatherhood among social service clients is experienced as a constant negotiation between the ideal of the "responsible breadwinner" and the intersecting class, ethnic, and gender inequalities that constrain recognition and practice of paternal care. Class, ethnic, and gender inequalities intersect to shape this experience: Poverty and housing exclusion restrict stability, ethnic stigmatisation further marginalises Roma fathers, and gendered institutional norms privilege mothers as primary caregivers. This demonstrates that paternal identity in contexts of exclusion cannot be explained at the individual level alone but must be understood as a political and structural phenomenon produced at the intersection of socio-economic conditions, ethnic hierarchies, and gendered expectations.

Since these problems can only be addressed at a structural level, the politicisation and mobilisation of social workers appears to be a key and urgent need for social work (Toft et al., 2023). Without structural measures,

social workers are doomed to experience feelings of powerlessness similar to those of their clients (Gojová & Glumbíková, 2015). It is essential to work with the concept of fatherhood as a fluid and socially constructed phenomenon that needs to be understood at the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity (Halpern et al., 2025; Strier & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021). If these changes are not made, social work risks inadvertently reproducing practices that continue to exclude marginalised fathers and delegitimise their parental role. Future research should therefore develop more inclusive theories of fatherhood that account for poverty, insecure housing, and precarious labour; social policy must also adapt to recognise fathers as legitimate partners in care.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to anonymous reviewers whose valuable comments helped us improve the article. We would like to thank all persons who participated in the research.

Funding

This article was co-funded by the European Union and Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports within the Operational Programme Johannes Amos Comenius (project STENEO: The Social Dimension of New Technologies in the Energy Sector in the Ostrava Metropolitan Area, Project Registration Number: CZ.02.01.01/00/23_021/0008591) and by the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic under grant number TJ04000152.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

LLMs Disclosure

This article was proofread using Writefull and ChatGPT as assistive AI tools to enhance language and grammar. All outputs generated by these tools underwent thorough human review to correct any errors and biases.

References

Baum, N. (2017). Gender-sensitive intervention to improve work with fathers in child welfare services. *Child and Family Social Work*, *22*(1), 419–427. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12259

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Braveman, P. A., Arkin, E., Proctor, D., Kauh, T., & Holm, N. (2022). Systemic and structural racism: Definitions, examples, health damages, and approaches to dismantling. *Health Affairs*, *41*(2), 171–178. https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.01489

Brewsaugh, K., Masyn, K. E., & Salloum, A. (2018). Child welfare workers' sexism and beliefs about father involvement. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *89*, 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.029

Broskevičová, Z. (2025). Living without privilege in Czech society: Building social work knowledge from lived experiences of inequalities. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *55*(4), 1753–1769. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf013

Caplan, P. J. (2007). Don't blame mother: Then and now. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Maternal theory: Essential readings* (pp. 592–600). Demeter Press.

Charles, P., Frankham, E., Garthe, R. C., Visher, C. A., & Kay, A. L. (2021). Father involvement in the first year after prison: Considerations for social work. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(8), 797–813. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211022806

Chuang, S. S., & Fagan, J. (2021). Ethnic and diverse fathering: Moving research forward. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *13*(3), 261–265. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12424

Clapton, G. (2009). How and why social work fails fathers: Redressing an imbalance, social work's role and responsibility. *Practice: Social Work in Action*, *21*(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503150902745989

Coakley, T. M., Shears, J. K., & Randolph, S. D. (2014). Understanding key barriers to fathers' involvement in their children's lives. *Child & Youth Services*, *35*(4), 343–364. https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2014.972550

Collins, P. H. (2000). Gender, black feminism, and black political economy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *568*, 41–53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049471

Connell, R. W. (2000). *The men and the boys*. University of California Press.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, *19*(6), 829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *8*, 139–167. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Cryer-Coupet, Q. R., Stokes, M. N., Lemmons, B. P., & Dorsey, M. (2021). Engaging nonresident fathers: Exploring collaborative competencies in support of family-centered practice. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(8), 880–892. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211022830

Davies, L., & Krane, J. (2006). Collaborate with caution: Protecting children, helping mothers. *Critical Social Policy*, *26*(2), 412–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018306062592

Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2004). Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement: Pathways, problems and progress. In R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement* (pp. 1–15). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Deutsch, F. M., & Saxon, S. E. (1998). The double standard of praise and criticism for mothers and fathers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *22*(4), 665–683. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1998.tb00184.x

Dominelli, L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Dominelli, L., Strega, S., Walmsley, C., Callahan, M., & Brown, L. (2011). Here's my story: Fathers of 'looked after' children recount their experiences in the Canadian child welfare system. *British Journal of Social Work*, *41*(2), 351–367. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq099

Douglas, E. M. (2017). Risk factors for fatal maltreatment victimization and perpetration. In E. M. Douglas (Ed.), *Child maltreatment fatalities in the United States: Four decades of policy, program, and professional responses* (pp. 27–46). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-7583-0_3

Eagly, A. H., & Crowley, M. (1986). Gender and helping behavior: A meta-analytic review of the social psychological literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, *100*(3), 283–308. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.100.3.283

Ewart-Boyle, S., Manktelow, R., & McColgan, M. (2015). Social work and the shadow father: Lessons for engaging fathers in Northern Ireland. *Child and Family Social Work*, *20*(4), 470–479. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12096

Fook, J. (2002). *Social work. Critical theory and practice.* Sage.

Ghate, D., Shaw, C., & Hazel, N. (2000). *Fathers and family centres: Engaging fathers in preventative services.* Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(3), 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality. *American Psychologist*, *56*(2), 109–118. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.2.109

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2011). Ambivalent sexism revisited. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *35*(3), 530–535. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684311414832

Gojová, A., & Glumbíková, K. (2015). (Bezmocná) sociální práce jako zdroj zplnomocnění? *Sociální práce/Sociálna práca/Czech and Slovak Social Work*, *15*(6), 52–63. https://socialniprace.cz/article/bezmocna-socialni-prace-jako-zdroj-zplnomocneni

Gřundělová, B. (2018). Kritická reflexe konstrukce mateřství a otcovství v sociální práci s rodinou. *Sociální práce/Sociálna práca/Czech and Slovak Social Work*, *18*(3), 40–53. https://socialniprace.cz/article/kriticka-reflexe-konstrukce-materstvi-a-otcovstvi-v-socialni-praci-s-rodinou

Gřundělová, B., Černý, J., Gojová, A., Stanková, Z., & Lisník, J. (2023). The shadow fathers: Barriers to whole family approach in social work? *Journal of Family Research*, *35*, 85–102. https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-796

Halpern, A., Urban-Stahl, U., Perez-Vaisvidovsky, N., & Mizrahi, R. (2025). Fathers in the eyes of family welfare services social workers in Germany and Israel: Feminism, ideals and disappointments. *International Social Work*, *68*(3), 461–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728241309480

Hašková, H. (2022). Rodičovské plány a cesty k rodičovství gayů a leseb. *Sociální studia/Social Studies*, *19*(2), 93–110. https://doi.org/10.5817/SOC2022-30890

Hong, P. Y. P., Lewis, D., Park, J. H., Hong, R., & Davies, E. (2021). Transforming impossible into possible (TIP) for fatherhood: An empowerment-based social work intervention. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(8), 826–835. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211004743

Janebová, R. (2020). Loïc Wacquant, the concept of the 'centaur state' and social work: The case of the Czech Republic. *European Journal of Social Work*, *25*(1), 4–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1819206

Janebová, R., & Černá, L. (2008). Konstrukce žen-klientek a mužů-klientů v praxi sociální práce. *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum*, *9*(2), 37–45. https://www.genderonline.cz/pdfs/gav/2008/02/05.pdf

Kempe, T. (2025). *Pojetí mateřství v sociální práci s rodinou* [unpublished master's thesis]. University of Ostrava, Faculty of Social Studies.

Klusáček, J., & Kalenda, S. (2024). *Česko na křižovatce—Zpráva o vyloučení z bydlení 2024: Vydáme se na cestu k ukončení bytové nouze a obchodu s chudobou?* Platforma pro sociální bydlení. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5ef4ac1cc5dd69384a10c66e/67051b21b2774f44ad64218a_zprava2024_compr.pdf

Kupka, P., Walach, V., & Tvrdá, K. (2021). Profit, or power? Towards a construction of organized crime in Czech policy. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, *66*, Article 100489. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2021.100489

Lamb, M. E., Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1987). A biosocial perspective on paternal behavior and involvement. In J. B. Lancaster, J. Altmann, A. S. Rossi, & L. R. Sherrod (Eds.), *Parenting across the lifespan: Biosocial perspectives* (pp. 111–142). Aldine Publishing.

Lee, T. L., Fiske, S. T., Glick, P., & Chen, Z. (2010). Ambivalent sexism in close relationships: (Hostile) power and (benevolent) romance shape relationship ideals. *Sex Roles*, *62*(7/8), 583–601. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9770-x

Lee, Y., Fagan, J. S., & Icard, L. D. (2018). Nonresidential fathers with children in foster care: A descriptive study in the United States. *Child & Family Social Work*, *23*(2), 146–154. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12393

Littlechild, B. (2014). Etika v kvalitativním výzkumu v sociální práci. In D. Baum & A. Gojová. (Eds.), *Výzkumné metody v sociální práci* (pp. 121–138). University of Ostrava. https://projekty.osu.cz/vedtym/dok/publikace/vyzkumne-metody-v-soc-praci.pdf

Lux, M., & Sunega, P. (2023). Housing wealth inequality, intergenerational transfers and young households in the super-homeownership system. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, *25*(2), 349–371. https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2023.2269618

Lyócsa, I. (2011). Príčiny a dopady konštruktov rodičovstva (materstva a otcovstva) u pracovníčok a pracovníkov sociálnoprávnej ochrany detí: Príklad Veľkej Británie, Kanady a Izraela. *Sociální práce/Sociálna práca/Czech and Slovak Social Work*, *11*(2), 96–104. https://socialniprace.cz/article/priciny-a-dopady-konstruktov-rodicovstva-materstva-a-otcovstva-u-pracovnicok-a-pracovnikov-socialnopravnej-ochrany-deti-priklad-velkej-britanie-kanady-a-izraela

Maté, G., & Maté, D. (2022). *The myth of normal: Trauma, illness, and healing in a toxic culture*. Ebury Publishing.

McMunn, A., Martin, P., Kelly, Y., & Sacker, A. (2015). Fathers' involvement: Correlates and consequences for child socioemotional behavior in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Family Issues*, *38*(8), 1109–1131. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15622415

Mertl, J., Gřundělová, B., & Gojová, A. (2025). Criminalisation of truancy as a manifestation of advanced marginality that mothers should be blamed for: Media framing in the Czech Republic. *Crime, Media, Culture*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590251405761

Mullaly, R. P. (1993). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory, and practice*. McClelland & Stewart.

Nedbálková, K. (2011). *Matky kuráže. Lesbické rodiny v pozdně moderní společnosti*. SLON.

Olszowy, L., Jaffe, P. G., Dawson, M., Straatman, A. L., & Saxton, M. D. (2020). Voices from the frontline: Child protection workers' perspectives on barriers to assessing risk in domestic violence cases. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *116*, Article 105208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105208

Pedersen, D. E. (2012). The good mother, the good father, and the good parent: Gendered definitions of parenting. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, *24*(3), 230–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2012.648141

Perez-Vaisvidovsky, N., Halpern, A., Mizrahi, R., & Atalla, Z. (2023). "Fathers are very important, but they aren't our contact persons": The primary contact person assumption and the absence of fathers in social work interventions. *Families in Society*, *104*(3), 292–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894221145751

Philip, G., Clifton, J., & Brandon, M. (2019). The trouble with fathers: The impact of time and gendered-thinking on working relationships between fathers and social workers in child protection practice in England. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(16), 2288–2309. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18792682

Prokop, D. (2022). *Slepé skvrny: O chudobě, vzdělávání, populismu a dalších výzvách české společnosti* (3rd ed.). Host.

Randles, J. (2018). Making men into "responsible" fathers. *Contexts*, *17*(2), 34–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218776962

Reimer, V., & Sahagian, S. (2015). Introduction. In V. Reimer & S. Sahagian (Eds.), *The mother-blame game* (pp. 1–16). Demeter Press.

Scheibling, C. (2020). Doing fatherhood online: Men's parental identities, experiences, and ideologies on social media. *Symbolic Interaction*, *43*(3), 472–492. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.459

Šmídová, I. (2008). Otcovství u porodu. Re-konstrukce genderových vztahů v rodině. *Sociální studia/Social Studies*, *5*(1), 11–34. https://doi.org/10.5817/SOC2008-1-11

Strega, S., Brown, L., Callahan, M., Dominelli, L., & Walmsley, C. (2009). Working with me, working at me: Fathers' narratives of child welfare. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *20*(1), 72–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871207

Strier, R., & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, N. (2021). Intersectionality and fatherhood: Theorizing non-hegemonic fatherhoods. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *13*(3), 334–346. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12412

Thompson, N. (2020). *Anti-discriminatory practice: Equality, diversity and social justice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Toft, J., Lightfoot, E. B., Calhoun, M., Choy-Brown, M., Merighi, J. R., Renner, L. M., Soffer-Elnekave, R., Mendel, J., & Marsalis, S. (2023). Effects of neoliberalism on social work practice in the United States: A scoping review. *Social Work Research*, *47*(2), 99–110. https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svad003

Trlifajová, L., & Pospíšil, F. (2023). From neoliberal restriction to control of the Roma—Towards post-neoliberal ethnic welfare. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, *59*(6), 665–692. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2023.053

Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*. Duke University Press.

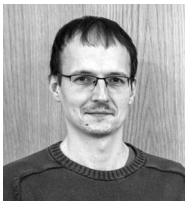
Weinberg, M. (2008). Structural social work: A moral compass for ethics in practice. *Critical Social Work*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v9i1.5761

Young, J. (1999). Cannibalism and bulimia: Patterns of social control in late modernity. *Theoretical Criminology*, *3*(4), 387–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480699003004001

About the Authors



Barbora Gřundělová is an associate professor at the Department of Social Work, University of Ostrava. Her research focuses on family social work. In her publications, she focuses on stereotypes in social work practices, the gendered constructions of women and men as clients, and the gender competence of social workers.



Jiří Mertl is an associate professor at the Department of Social Work, University of Ostrava. He specialises in criminology, social justice, critical social work, social deviance, and marginalisation. He is currently interested in social work and counselling with prisoners and released persons, from the perspective of critical social work.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10874
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10874

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Between Supportive and Equal Parenting: Exploring Middle-Class Fathering in Romania Today

Anca Dohotariu [1], Réka Geambașu [2,3], and Cristina Rat [2]

[1] Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania
[2] Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
[3] ELTE CERS Budapest, Hungary

Correspondence: Réka Geambașu (reka.geambasu@ubbcluj.ro)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 22 September 2025 **Published:** 15 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

The profound restructuring that Romania underwent in the last decades of post-socialist transformations and EU accession and membership has brought along changes in family life, including fathers' involvement in parental responsibilities. Today, family arrangements incorporate gender equality values but also opposition to them, alongside an uneven revival of certain conservative norms. Drawing upon a relational approach that analyses the interplay between parental care as a process and gender equality, our research aims to capture the performative, "alive," and constantly transforming features of fathering. We focus on the experiences of middle-class fathers with preschool-age children and their narratives about parental care for infants, balancing ideals of "involved fatherhood" with the everyday actions of involved fathering. To this end, we conducted 41 in-depth qualitative interviews with highly educated, cisgender, and ethnically diverse urbanite fathers who raise their children together with their partners. Our findings confirm that middle-class fathers' involvement is shaped by employment and workplace arrangements, as well as by mothers' attitudes and the concrete needs of the infant. By looking at fathering as performative, i.e., at "doing" fathering, we could see it as constantly shifting along a continuum of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement. However, our inquiry highlights that "involved fathering" does not necessarily overlap with "equal parenting." Overall, we identified a pattern in fathers' narratives that portrays them as "supportive," as protecting the mother-child bond, at least during the first months of the infants' lives. When this occurs, conjugal partners become solely parents with asymmetric parental responsibilities.

Keywords

child care; class; family; gender equality; involved fathering; parental responsibilities; Romania

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

In recent decades, numerous studies have focused on fathers' involvement in child care and other family-related responsibilities. These publications emerge from different disciplines, including care, family, and gender studies, social psychology, welfare, and social policy research (Pustułka & Sikorska, 2023; Sikorska, 2016; Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021; Takács, 2020), and approach involved fatherhood from different angles of investigation, such as paid and unpaid work, caring masculinities, kinship, child development, and social policy provisions (Grau-Grau et al., 2022). Many scholars see fatherhood and fathering transformations in liberal capitalist societies as part of a broader "incomplete gender revolution," as the overall increase in women's paid employment has not translated into similar levels of men's involvement in household and family obligations (Akácsos & Geambașu, 2024; Daly, 2020; Doucet, 2017; Geambașu, 2024; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Oechsle et al., 2012; Takács, 2020). Conversely, significant changes in attitudes and cultural meanings related to fathering expose the contrast between engaged fathering and hegemonic masculinity, which underscores men's primary role as breadwinners and providers, often to the detriment of their parental involvement (Hobson, 2014; O'Brien & Wall, 2017; Oechsle et al., 2012).

How do these processes unfold in post-socialist countries characterised by a mixture of social continuities and changes, with a high participation of women in the labour market and the enduring habitus of traditional families (Dumănescu, 2012; Fodor et al., 2002; Kligman, 1998)? What are their aspirations and practices regarding involved fathering? This article examines the nexus between parental care and gender equality within families in post-socialist Romania. Drawing on a relational approach (Doucet, 2006, 2014, 2015; Tronto, 2013), it consists of a qualitative inquiry that examines the narratives of middle-class, ethnically diverse, heterosexual fathers regarding their parental responsibilities and child care-related activities. It offers one of the first analyses aiming to reveal the interplay between transformative fathering and fluid family (in)equalities, as observed in Romania today.

During and after its accession to the European Union, Romania has experienced a mixture of continuities and reforms visible at various societal levels, either normative (legal and political), organisational, or at the level of social practices. As family policies received less political attention in Romania than in other post-socialist countries, the country adopted European recommendations more smoothly, albeit with some delays. The 2019/1158 EU Directive on life-work balance (European Union, 2019) was transposed in the national legislation only in August 2022, expanding paternity leaves and adding a second month to the "daddy quota" of paid child care (parental) leave, in place since 2015. Still, these generous earnings-related benefits translate into a "gendering" of family policies, with asymmetric effects on parenting (Dohotariu, 2018; Hašková & Saxonberg, 2016; Saxonberg, 2014). The combination of short but well-paid paternity leave and considerably longer, non-parent-specific child care leave is widespread among EU countries, including CEE countries (Albrecht et al., 2017, p. 49). Typically, mothers have been using the long child care leave, and the introduction of the other parent's share was hardly a game-changer. In policy terms, in Romania, paid maternity leave has been integrated into the social insurance system since the early 20th century, while paternity leave emerged only in 1999, offering five days of paid leave at the standard replacement rate of the insurance system (approx. 85%), paid by the employer. An additional ten days were granted to those who obtained a "puericulture" certificate, but only once. Following the national transposition of the 2019/1158 EU Directive on work–life balance in 2022, the period of leave was extended to ten days and the benefit was upgraded to the value of one's salary. The new law offered only an extra five days for the

puericulture certificate, but for each child. Paid child care leave is covered from the social protection budget, and since 2015, a compulsory one month is included for "the other" parent, usually the father, increased to two months in 2022, following the same EU Directive. The replacement rate of the benefit is 85% of one's salary, and parents cannot take the leave simultaneously. Early return to work has been compensated since 2005 with a monthly financial stimulus, gradually upgraded and extended since then.

Overall, the Romanian post-socialist welfare regime appears to adhere to a "gender sameness" understanding of equality, similar to other CEE countries (Daly, 2020, p. 40). Additionally, although there is official interest in the current transformations and diversification of family relationships, primarily driven by demographic concerns, the hegemonic political discourse glorifies the importance of the "traditional Romanian family," as opposed to the family institution aligned with gender equality and other democratic values (Băluță & Tufiș, 2023; Zaharijević et al., 2023). In this context, Romanian women are no exception to experiencing the historical "gender yo-yo effect," being dragged back and forth between paid work and family commitments (Takács, 2020, p. 488). More precisely, women continue to bear a double burden and shape their identities in relation to the ideal of motherhood as an accomplishment of femininity, but set the standards of motherhood much higher than the previous generations: "Intensive mothering" has become the norm (Nagy et al., 2023). Conversely, the social construction of masculinity remains centred on the same traditional patriarchal importance of male breadwinning, but takes on new cultural meanings and practices related to caring masculinities and involved fathering (Oláh & Fratczak, 2013; Takács, 2013). Tellingly, a 2018 comparative study on caring fathers in Europe revealed that Romanian fathers were the least likely to make costly work adjustments to embrace caring roles at home (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2024). In the same vein, the 2018 Romanian Gender Barometer (the latest available as of August 2025) reports that only 32.8% of respondents agreed with the statement that "men can raise children just as well as women," with no statistically significant differences between female and male respondents (Grünberg, 2019, pp. 20, 61).

At the same time, Romania underwent significant diversification in family structures and gendered family relationships, including those related to parenthood and parenting experiences. Although representative of a rather "silent revolution" that began before the fall of state socialism and continued after 1990 (Dohotariu, 2015; Mureșan, 2008), changing family constellations include a growing involvement of fathers in early child care, education, and other parental concerns. Today, family arrangements reveal a seemingly paradoxical mixture of changes and resistance to change. A revival of conservative norms and various forms of opposition to gender equality coexist with the dual carer–dual earner model and the ideal of shared family responsibilities. These dynamics are also intricately intertwined with supranational crises, including the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Oates-Indruchová et al., 2024) and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which boosted military expenditures at the detriment of welfare spending. The existing body of scholarship has long described the trends in family dynamics in Romania in recent decades, occasionally also referring to the seemingly paradoxical contradictions between the persistence of conservative attitudes and values and changes driven by gender equality (Bădescu et al., 2007; Kravchenko & Robilă, 2015). Nevertheless, only a few studies provided convincing explanations. Notably, in 2015, Kovács reminded us that during the 1990s and 2000s, Romanians generally considered fathers as essential contributors to children's upbringing, particularly those from urban areas and those who were highly educated, as "the most egalitarian" regarding child-rearing responsibilities (Kovács, 2015, p. 280). The 2018 Gender Barometer revealed that university education increased the likelihood of sharing more gender egalitarian views on the distribution of domestic tasks and provider roles for the family (Grünberg, 2019, pp. 68–69). Also, some scholars examined the

construction of cultural meanings of masculinities through the lens of "dadfluencing" in the context of spreading anti-gender discourse and campaigns (Neaga & Ștefan, 2021). Others conducted top-down analyses on how family policy instruments can influence parental arrangements regarding child care (Kovács, 2018, p. 28) or examined parental involvement in Romania, focusing on the still underexplored gender dimension in domestic settings (Ion et al., 2025, p. 110).

Considering all these, our article presents a qualitative analysis that aims to provide an in-depth examination of middle-class, ethnically diverse, heterosexual, cisgender fathers' involvement in early child care in Romania. Drawing from a relational approach (Doucet, 2006, 2015; Tronto, 2013), we avoid the trap of measuring transformative "ontological realities" that, in fact, are not measurable. Instead, our innovative fieldwork explores how fathers engage in child care or simply slide down towards "disinvolved" fathering, and the interplay between fathers' parental responsibilities and intra-household gender (in)equalities. Our micro-level analysis aims to capture the performative, "alive," and constantly transforming features of fathering, in line with the idea of "doing parenting" and "doing gender" (Allen, 2021; Orloff & Laperrière, 2021). However, we concentrate on the early stages of fathering, starting with pregnancy and continuing through the months after childbirth. This choice aligns with Doucet's argument that this early parenting period is characterised by the amplification of biological and social differences between mothers and fathers, which can take on significant disproportions due to enduring gendered disparities in parenting and employment strategies (Doucet, 2009, p. 93). Therefore, our analysis centres on specific infant care experiences. By doing this, we seek to uncover fathers' interests, motivations, choices, expectations, and desires for more active involvement in child care, or the absence of it, and intra-couple negotiations, tensions, and discrepancies among the various meanings of "involved fatherhood" and the tangible manifestations of "fathering," all of which emerge from our interviewees' narratives.

2. Theoretical Framework

The differentiation between "fatherhood" and "fathering" does not seem to be of vital importance to most scholars. Still, their understandings do not entirely overlap, which calls for some clarification. For example, Kravchenko and Robilă (2015, p. 109) refer to fatherhood as related to masculinity norms, parenthood, or kinship, including fathers' legal rights and obligations towards their descendants, as well as paternal involvement in children's well-being. In contrast, they assign fathering to the day-to-day participation of fathers in routine care. Other scholars introduce the notion of "fatherliness," without, however, opposing it to fatherhood. Instead, these authors emphasise the discrepancy between the traditional fatherhood model, interpreted as related to hegemonic masculinity and strongly focused on full-time paid work and provider duties, and the various newly developed forms of modern "fatherly involvement." Accordingly, what is truly essential to current changes in parenting is the contemporary societal shift from masculine parental authority to emotional responsiveness, which has recently permeated father-child relationships (Oechsle et al., 2012).

Given the ambiguous nature of the term "involvement" (Dermott, 2003; Takács, 2020, p. 489), the syntagm of "involved fathers" in child care and other family obligations has not developed into a common concept. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree to define it as fathers' simultaneous commitments to paid work and family-related responsibilities at various practical and emotional levels, including "presence, practical care, nurturance and affection" (Machin, 2015, p. 39, as cited in Takács, 2020, p. 488). In this vein, our analysis builds on previously discussed understandings of fathers' involvement in child care, while focusing on "involved

fathering" instead of "fathers' involvement." Our explicit choice of the verb indicates that we do not reduce "fathering" to a mere set of indicators. Instead, we aim to bring to the fore the performative dimension of fathering, focusing specifically on its occurrence, dynamics, and transformations as an active process of care (Allen, 2021, pp. 45–50; Tronto, 2013, p. 22).

Our analysis relies on a relational sociological approach, situated at the intersection of various disciplines such as family studies, care studies, and gender research, and which conceives family relations as gendered and socially instituted by definition, i.e., "relational ontologies" imbued with frameworks of dynamic, processual, "alive" and constantly changing meanings and expectations (Doucet, 2017; Kremer, 2007; Tronto, 2013). In line with this theoretical framework, analysing the nexus between parental care and gender equality within families entails a two-fold conceptual background. Our article draws on Doucet's perspective on gendered parental responsibilities (Doucet, 2006, 2014, 2015), which we correlate with Verloo and Lombardo's (2007) explanations of gender equality understood as sameness, difference, or transformation.

Inspired by extensive scholarship on parenting grounded in symbolic interactionism, with phenomenological roots, Doucet (2015, p. 231) conceptualises parental responsibilities as a threefold set of entangled emotional, community, and moral responsibilities that are gendered, fluid, temporal, relational, and inseparable from the context in which they occur. Doucet (2015, p. 226) claims further:

> I argue for a conception of (gendered parental caregiving) responsibility that is constituted by movement, fluidity, flux, negotiation, subjective interpretations of what these mean, and how these responsibilities unfold within households and between households and social institutions across time.

Hence, Doucet's approach enables us to examine involved fathering not merely as a dyadic exchange between entirely autonomous family members, but as a social relationship that develops through various meanings, bonding, and embodied experiences. However, unlike Doucet, who states that there are parenting situations in which gendered embodiment does not necessarily make a difference in child care (Doucet, 2009), we align our inquiry closer to the idea that gendered bodies always matter (Gabb, 2012). Also, Doucet's conceptual framework highlights the historicity and cultural specificity of gender equality as a concept, as well as its various meanings, including difference, sameness, and transformation (Doucet, 2015; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). More precisely, gender equality as difference has long legitimised the "fusion" ideal of a parental couple into one single entity: "*comment*, *avec deux*, *ne faire qu'un*" ("how the two shall become one flesh"; see Théry, 1999). From our perspective, this view entails an analysis of mothering and fathering based on binary male/female differentiation, rooted primarily in individuals' biological characteristics that assign them to the traditional gender order. In turn, gender equality as sameness aligns with "gender neutrality," which has been developed through legal principles and norms. This means that parents can be treated as if they were interchangeable at any time, while implicitly ignoring that mothers and fathers are not abstract principles, but embodied human beings. Finally, envisioning gender equality as transformation or displacement (Orloff & Laperrière, 2021; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007) paves the way for replacing the fixity of certain gender understandings with more fluid conceptions: Rather than "being" parents, both fathers and mothers are constantly engaged in an ongoing process of "doing" or "performing" embodied gendered parenting. Overall, considering these different visions of gender equality, Doucet's work is especially valuable for our analysis, as it helps us address the mainstream sameness/difference dilemma prevalent in gender, family, social policy, and parenting literature.

In line with the framework of gendered caregiving parental responsibilities that defines fathering as a "love labour" that cannot be quantified or commodified but can be recognised in parents' narratives (Doucet, 2015), our micro-level inquiry explores fathers' narratives of practices and meanings of involved fathering and their interplay with gender equality in today's Romanian context. Our analysis contributes to the field by providing an angle of investigation that has not been explored in previous research.

3. Methods and Sample

We embrace a qualitative approach aimed at exploring middle-class fathers' narratives about how they have experienced their involvement in child care for their infants and toddlers, and how relations with their partners, i.e., the mothers, have changed and reshaped throughout that period. Our purpose is to reveal how fathers define what it means and what it takes to be an "involved father," and how they recall enacting "involved fathering" as a social practice in their everyday life. Observing in situ these everyday practices and/or confronting them with mothers' narratives would certainly be highly interesting, but it falls outside the frame of this article. We did not aim to obtain accurate descriptions of child care practices validated by mothers or other persons closely connected to the family, but rather to gather detailed subjective narratives conveyed by the fathers.

We narrowed our focus to middle-class fathers living in larger cities and their metropolitan areas, as they represent the category most likely to share more progressive views on gender roles and (gendered) practices within the family (Kovács, 2015, p. 280). Their jobs are also more likely to allow flexible time arrangements that enable them to take up child care responsibilities, especially when they can work remotely from home. Furthermore, previous studies revealed that middle-class fathers get involved in child care and early education with the aim of ensuring the social reproduction of a relatively privileged position or upward social mobility for their children (Vincent & Ball, 2007). We used the term "middle-class" as a widely recognised label for highly educated non-manual employees or self-employed individuals working in professional or managerial jobs characterised by relative autonomy and control over the labour process, secure employment, access to social insurance, and incomes above the national average. In Romania, as elsewhere in CEE, this category is concentrated mainly in big cities, and they largely share a trajectory of upward social mobility from working-class parents and territorial mobility from smaller cities and rural areas occasioned by their university studies (Pop, 2016). We opted to include only respondents living in large cities, given the greater availability of crèches and kindergartens, and the relative diversity of public and private child care services, which facilitate the renegotiation of gendered parental roles.

We regarded middle-class fathers as a heterogeneous category, diverse along the lines of profession and field of study (from social sciences to computing and engineering), as well as in terms of ethnicity, religion, cultural practices, and individual trajectories of social mobility. Our conversations took into account these forms of identity and belonging. However, it was hardly possible to construct a purposive sample based on all these categories. Consequently, we used the following criteria to build our purposive (theoretical) sample of fathers: tertiary education, residence in larger cities or their metropolitan areas, stable income around or above the national average, ethnicity (to ensure diversity in terms of the historical ethnic groups of Romania), and raising at least one child below the age of five in a heterosexual couple. Our fieldwork includes 41 interviews, with two conducted on-site and 39 conducted online, between December 2024 and March 2025. All interviewees have completed university education, and their occupations range from freelance

artists to journalists, project coordinators in NGOs, sociologists, educational experts, IT specialists, professional firefighters, and military officers. Most of them have only one child, while the remainder have two children. Altogether, only two respondents have children from previous relationships, and two of them were expecting a child at the time of the interview. In terms of ethnicity, our sample includes 16 Romanians, 13 Hungarians from Transylvania, eight Roma, three Romanians who moved from the Republic of Moldova, and one Lipovean Russian. All of them have Romanian citizenship, and except for the three respondents born and raised in the Republic of Moldova, all have spent their childhood in Romania. We decided to limit our research to the relatively similar cultural milieus of the largest historical ethnic groups in Romania, and withdrew the initial ambition to also include migrants from outside Europe, due to inherent boundaries of an exploratory research article. Most of our respondents are between 30 and 40 years old, with two outlier cases of young fathers who just turned 26 and 28, respectively, and five fathers between the ages of 45 and 48. The majority belong to the historical Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant (Reformed) churches, but only a handful of them are religious and practising. All of them are living in large cities, mostly Bucharest and Cluj, but we also had respondents from Brașov, Călărași, Oradea, Pitești, Târgoviște, and Târgu Mureș.

The limited scope of this article did not allow us to expand our research to the cases of single fathers, homosexual couples, or other types of families. In-depth interviews were conducted by the three authors and a graduate student, primarily online and occasionally on-site. We paid particular attention to parental and conjugal relationships, and their evolution over time, as these emerged from each narrative. Holding the interviews online had the advantage of allowing for more natural recording and for reaching out to respondents from all over the country, while also accommodating considerably tighter schedules. However, it had the drawback that, on a few occasions, their partner and/or their children entered the room, and we had to put the conversation on hold for a brief intermission. Our questions focused on children's first three years of life; when there were two or more children in the family, we asked fathers to speak about their youngest child. All respondents were eager to discuss their experiences, and they shared the view that fathers' involvement in child care is much less discussed than what is actually needed.

In interpreting our findings, we used detailed reading and thematic coding to select and organise relevant interview fragments (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We complemented thematic analysis with narrative analysis of "how people make sense of what happened…and to what effect" (Bryman, 2016, p. 589). Still, two main issues should be considered. First, for many of our interviewees, the birth of the child and the first time spent with the child occurred while the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic were in place. This limited couples' possibilities to outsource infant care and child care to extended family (in particular grandmothers) or babysitters, but also provided the possibility for fathers to work from home. Second, all four interviewers were women, which may have led to social desirability effects when asking men about their fathering experiences.

4. Findings

The results of the analysis are structured around several themes from our qualitative fieldwork: the cultural meanings associated with "involved fathering," including how interviewees refer to their own fathers, and their narratives about key moments in their own fathering experiences, such as those related to pregnancy, childbirth, and the early stages of infant care. For this article, we focus on the initial stages of fathering, aiming to analyse how the performative process of involved fathering occurs and transforms within our interviewees' experiences. Additionally, we aim to explore the interplay between involved fathering and equal parenting as

it emerges from our interviews with middle-class Romanian fathers. Although we invited them to share "the story" of their fathering, all recordings include references to the stages that we address in this article. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that many interviewees shared their enthusiasm for discussing their "involved fathering" experiences, either because they are passionate about the topic and could talk for hours about their children, or because they believe that fathers' voices are not listened to enough today. One father spontaneously stated that although the "newest" generations include dads who are significantly more involved in child care than previous ones, people rarely pay attention to their experiences, and their voices often remain unheard.

4.1. Cultural Meanings of Involved Fathering

One aim of our field research was to identify the cultural meanings associated with "involved fathering," either through direct questions or as they implicitly emerged from our interviewees' narratives. The direct questions elicited a variety of responses that generally fit into two categories. First, when referring to the father-child relationship, interviewees considered being "involved" to mean, above all, being available in terms of time, attentiveness, and responsiveness, and making the choice to "prioritize" the child over other responsibilities and to build a relationship with them: "It is pointless to be physically present if you are not giving the child the attention they need" (military, 33). Beyond presence, fathers' involvement also means "thinking about the child, even when you are not there" (corporate, 35), which recalls the emotional and moral responsibilities conceptualised by Doucet (2015). More importantly, one father emphasised that the child is not merely an amorphous care receiver (as usually referred to in most analyses on child care), but a constantly evolving human being who actively contributes in various ways to the father-child relationship, even when not verbally articulated (journalist, 39). Overall, the father-child relationship not only legitimises fathers' involvement in child care, but it also questions the social definition of masculinity:

> At least among my friends, there is no longer that stereotype that the mother has to do most of the work, and the father's role is more of a nanny. Being an involved father has become normal lately. It is no longer a joke topic and an attack on masculinity. No, there is no one to laugh at fathers who walk their child in a stroller. I mean, it's also about building a relationship with your child. (corporate, 35)

Second, interviewees ascribe "involved fathering" to a holistic perception of family life regarded as a unit that relies on the father's responsibility to provide for his family's well-being and safety: "There is no child care or education without a roof on top and on an empty stomach!" (IT specialist, corporate, 37). A prevalent tendency among our interviewees was to define "involved fathering" as the support they provide to their partner, who is often seen as the primary caregiver. In their view, "involved fathering" means being ready and available to take over any material requirements concerning the infant and to support mothers' needs of any kind, and, most of all, their decisions regarding the child. Still, our qualitative data includes one outlier narrative that suggests an understanding of equal parenting as sameness or interchangeability. In this father's view, "involved fathering" is still configured in relation to the mother's role, and yet, the father's involvement is not only limited to being supportive, but it is the ability to substitute for the mother at any time and in any possible task. Overall, all interviewees refer to involved fathering as something positive and desirable: "There is no father who would label himself as a "non-involved" father in child care" (gambling expert, 37).

Our fieldwork reveals various situations concerning how fathers describe their own dad's family-related and caring roles. Some of the interviewees declare that they proudly reproduced their paternal model: "I raise my

son just like my dad used to raise me" (military, 33). Others contest it: "My father was so overwhelmingly protective and controlling, which I hope I am not" (IT specialist, private company, 36). Some simply acknowledge it: "My father's main responsibility was related to the shopping lists that my mother gave him; he was never directly involved in other child care tasks. But this was not abnormal. I love both my parents, just like they were" (corporate, 35). Still others cannot compare with their fathers, who worked abroad for undetermined periods of time, were responsible for financially supporting their children, but left them at home in their grandmother's care (sales officer, 32). Nevertheless, some interviewees refer to generational differences in parenting, especially those who choose to keep their parents out of the process of raising and caring for their grandchildren. Not only do they evoke the differences between "demanding" and "entertaining" grandpas, who either fail or succeed in bonding with their grandchildren, respectively, but they also refer to "old" ways of raising children, more rigid and normatively framed, as opposed to current parenting methods. In their view, the latter are more "open" and centred on the child's sensorial and cognitive development at each stage of their lives. More importantly, interviewees emphasise the importance of the societal context, which, in their views, makes a significant difference in parenting from one generation to the next. This idea aligns with the relational approach, which suggests that "action (i.e., what parents do) is not only rational, but also relational, and *done in context*" (Kremer, 2007, p. 76, emphasis added). According to some narratives, mothers generally want to return to paid employment, sooner or later, after having a child. Thus, equal parenting occurs not necessarily because it is a highly desirable "new" cosmopolitan generational ideal, but because it takes place within a context where each parent has specific professional commitments, leading them to support each other in care-related tasks as well.

4.2. Fathers' Narratives on Pregnancy and Childbirth

One of the initial distinctions between fathering and mothering, derived from our fieldwork, pertains to the issue of "maternal instinct." Some fathers spontaneously mentioned it as an uncontested "given" that can explain differences in parental tactics and involvement, while others declared that they "learned how to listen to it and how to accept it as it is, for the best interest of the child" (IT specialist, private company, 36). Either way, some fathers explain that mothers are always better at "feeling" the needs of the cared-for, simply because they spend more time with their babies. Others invoke common naturalist arguments related to women's bodies, which change throughout pregnancy:

> When a birth occurs, women are flooded with a hormone cocktail that helps them incredibly. In our case, I was amazed to see my wife manage without sleep the baby's first month. Meanwhile, the mere five hours of sleep I got made me stumble around the house like a zombie, while she could have easily run a marathon if she wanted to. It was undoubtedly the hormone cocktail that helped her get through that. (IT specialist, corporate, 37)

We did not encounter narratives that explicitly challenged the biological division between "men and women," which remained a referential framework for the social construction of gender. For some interviewees, "genetic," "hormonal," and "neuronal" factors related to women's bodies explain that "there is an extra bond between the mother and the child" (NGO worker, 38). Others consider that this "bond" is formed during pregnancy and lingers on after childbirth.

Pregnancy also renders the biological differences between heterosexual partners into a perceived "undeniable certainty." Interviewees recall that during pregnancy, not only did their partners' condition change, but their own experience shifted from being exclusively conjugal partners to a sui generis fatherly role, even at this early stage of becoming a father. In this regard, our fieldwork reveals two main tendencies that do not necessarily exclude each other. First, some fathers decided to read and gather all necessary information about the evolution of the foetus and women's bodily transformations during pregnancy and then use this knowledge to ease their partners' experiences and help them more effectively, but also to bond with the newborn. These fathers described their need to connect with the baby starting in the very initial stages of pregnancy, through physical touch on the mother's belly to better feel the foetus's movements, or through reading stories, singing, or talking: "The very first minutes when I saw my new-born daughter, I could clearly confirm the bond between us" (sociologist, 47). Many interviewees also attended all medical check-ups and foetal monitoring during pregnancy, and they highlight their personal reactions to the foetus's evolution:

> Baby monitoring during pregnancy was the biggest stress of my life. I've never experienced anything more shocking than this, I mean, the emotions I had when I saw the baby for the first time at the ultrasound…and when I was about to find out if it had two hands, two legs, if its eyes were well placed…or the infinite days when I had to wait for the results of medical tests. I have never been happier than in the moments when the doctor told me that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the foetus. But from the day of the test until we went to the hospital to see the results, my knees were weakening meter by meter. (IT specialist, self-employed, 32)

Second, our interviews reveal that the pregnancy stage is also referential for a significant transformation in the process of fathering, namely, the conversion from being a conjugal partner to becoming a helper. In this way, fathers do not participate in pregnancy as partners, since they feel they cannot fully share it equally with the mothers. Instead, pregnancy is, in their view, the very first instance when they develop their supportive role and embrace a holistic approach that encompasses the mother-foetus entity, perceived as inseparable. For instance, two cases are particularly eloquent. One father recalls his "natural" need to "take more care" of his pregnant partner, to "love her even more," to take on the "nesting" responsibility (i.e., to renovate, clean, and prepare a welcoming home for the upcoming baby)—all in all, to create "a protective balloon" surrounding his pregnant wife, to offer her "everything she needed," and "even to isolate and shield her" from the potentially dangerous "outside world," while facing by himself all the "external difficulties that hit him in the face," such as financial issues or any other surrounding problems: "During pregnancy, I didn't choose anything. All the choices were always hers. I was not there to make decisions, but only to support hers. And I simply listened to the mother and did whatever she needed me to do" (artist, 31). In the same vein, our second example reinforces the idea of a process in which, starting from possibly equal conjugal partners before pregnancy, fathers become "supportive parents," whose responsibility is to address and take care of the mother-child relationship:

> I learned that I need to take care of the mother because this includes caring for the child. I mean, the mother is primarily responsible for the child, which is fine, and that doesn't mean the father doesn't need to get involved too; however, his focus must be on the mother and, indirectly, the child. (sociologist, 47)

Nevertheless, the interviewee emphasised that this process comes at a cost that fathers must deal with. More precisely, he explained that, during pregnancy, a woman undergoes a complete transformation

physically, mentally, and emotionally, and the partner she was before "disappears" and turns into someone else—a mother. At the same time, the father-to-be also experiences changes, but "nobody mentions" his transformation, even though it may bring about significant frustrations and costs: "From a partner to share your life with, you become the one who executes, the one who feels like they are sacrificing a lot, the one who often feels like they no longer matter, and no longer exist" (sociologist, 47). In other words, being "supportive" could be "pure joy" sometimes, but it could likewise be a "duty," as well as a source of intra-couple tensions and frictions, especially when domestic tasks are too demanding or the father simply fails to act as the mother expects him to. Overall, pregnancy is a referential stage for the dynamics of gendered parenting, which builds on embodied gendered asymmetries between the father and his partner.

In most cases, our interviewees declare that all details related to childbirth, such as the location or medical facility, and the procedure, were entirely the mother's choice, which reminds us of the feminist principle "her body, her choice." However, regarding fathers' participation in childbirth, public hospitals do not provide this opportunity; only private clinics do. This creates an immediate gap between parents who can afford private medical care and those who cannot, which is worth mentioning, although our sample does not address this issue, since it includes only financially better-off fathers. Many interviewees recall that, regardless of their personal options, during the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions were very strict, and they were not even allowed to enter the clinics. All they could do was wait for the mother and the newborn to be discharged so they could take them home. Apart from the pandemic restrictions, our sample includes both fathers who did not participate in childbirth and those who did. In the first case, fathers refer to their partners' decision to exclude them from that particular experience. For instance, one father recalled that: "We talked about it and she told me she didn't want me to see her during childbirth; not only is she a strong person, but she is too proud for that" (sociologist, 47). In the same vein, another father declared that:

> Childbirth is something that solely belongs to the mother and the child. She didn't want me to see her that way, and neither did I. In my view, fathers who do that are so selfish; they are intruders who are there just for themselves, and not for their partners. (IT specialist, corporate, 37)

In the other case, our sample comprises situations when fathers were allowed to be present during childbirth, including natural births and C-sections, with the latter being notably more common in Romania than in many other European countries (Slovenski et al., 2024). For example, one father decided to record the C-section procedure performed by "a female doctor with whom I planned the war, and we won the war! [laughs]" (military, 33). Not only does his profession explain the fortitude to be part of such moments, but he had planned to be there, to offer his partner psychological support, out of curiosity, as well as out of pride: "It was my first newborn son, I wanted to see him stepping into this world, and to be there for him" (military, 33). While he stated that every father should make his own decision, another interviewee suggests that all fathers should participate in childbirth if they have the option:

> Childbirth is a real torment. I saw it with my own eyes, and there is no more important support for the mother than being there by her side. As long as both parents decide to have a baby, then the father should always be there for her, with no exception. (marketing & sales officer, 32)

Overall, contrary to the ideal that parents should experience childbirth as partners, because of parents' asymmetrical biological participation in childbirth, our interviewees see it more as a turning point when

fathers' role is, once again, to "support" and "protect" their partners, as long as they are able and allowed to do so.

4.3. Fathering During the Early Stages of Infant Care

In line with previous research, our fieldwork confirms that parents' decisions to share parental responsibilities change from one stage of child development to another, involving various commitments and activities that range from infant care to toddler care. Still, most fathers declared that they were not aware of any normative division of parental involvement, such as "à priori, fathers have to do this, and mothers have to do that," which slightly contradicts their taken-for-granted convictions about "maternal instinct" and the mother-baby bond and underscores the fluidity of such "convictions." Regarding infant care, our interviewees stated that they did not refrain from any hands-on care tasks concerning the baby, such as feeding, changing diapers, cleaning, bathing, or putting the baby to sleep.

Breastfeeding, widely regarded as the most "natural" and beneficial way to nourish newborns and infants, is a central tenet of intensive motherhood, which new mothers most frequently align with (Faircloth, 2013). Whether or not they have consulted parenting literature, partners of middle-class women are aware of these norms and tend to adopt a supportive stance toward breastfeeding. This exclusive role of mothers in early infant feeding, however, can inadvertently become a barrier for fathers who are eager to take an active role in their babies' lives. In our sample, no father complained of "unjust" physical differences that prevented them from engaging in activities that only mothers can do (Doucet, 2006, 2017). Still, whenever mothers were unable to breastfeed the baby, or could do it only partially, some fathers were happy to "reframe" the situation and take over bottle-feeding the infant. While fathers expressed disappointment at not fulfilling this hallmark of "natural" and responsive parenting, these situations sometimes opened up new opportunities for involved fathering. They described these moments as pivotal in deepening their bond with their child and making it somewhat easier for mothers. As one father recounted:

> Well, it was bad that she struggled with breastfeeding, but from another point of view, it was good that it allowed me to feed him. It was extremely funny to "finger feed" him: you know, the technique where you attach a small tube to your finger and use it to give formula. It was extraordinary to feel how strongly such a tiny baby could suckle. So, I guess I can count that as an advantage. (freelance artist, 37)

Overall, our fieldwork includes two examples that are particularly relevant to the process of fathering along the axis of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement and its interplay with equal parenting. First, our sample includes the case of a father with a traumatic family event. His wife's first pregnancy with twins resulted in only one of the premature babies surviving. Because it happened during the pandemic, only after insistence was the mother given an exemption to leave the hospital to bury her baby, taking the risk of not being able to return to the hospital to be there for the other twin, born much too early. Later on, another pregnancy occurred unplanned, and, contrary to all medical expectations, it resulted in a healthy newborn at term. On the one hand, the father's narrative reveals that he perceived himself in an asymmetrical situation compared to his partner's, thus assuming a rather supportive role. Although directly affected by their loss, the father underscored that:

> I was deeply affected, but not as much as my wife was. She bore all the weight on her shoulders; she carried both those babies inside her, and I can't even find the words to describe how she survived those moments. I can only imagine what it must have been like for her. (engineer, 32)

On the other hand, during the second pregnancy, the father became the stay-at-home primary caregiver for the entire family—i.e., the pregnant mother forced to rest in bed, and also their toddler.

> Starting from the first months of pregnancy, I didn't go to the office at all. I just stayed home and worked from home, as much as I could. And I took care of everything that could be done around the house. She had to have total bed rest. She wasn't allowed to get out of bed except to go to the toilet, which meant I had to take care of everything. For Junior, I had to entertain him, do activities with him, pay him all the attention he needed, play with him, keep him on my head, and spin him around. To do everything for him, on top of all the other things, such as the food, the cleaning, and absolutely everything! It was vital to be at home with my pregnant wife, to bring her food to bed, bring her a glass of water, give her pills, and take her to the hospital in case of emergency….And I lived like that on constant alert for five or six months, when everything was on my shoulders. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, I'm just telling you how it was, you know? I was also fortunate enough to benefit from support on the job side. Anyways, I would have quit the job otherwise. (engineer, 32)

Second, our sample includes an example of how initially planned involved fathering can turn into disinvolved fathering, at least for some stages of the child's life. A self-defined "progressive" and "non-traditionalist" father had planned to be very much involved in raising his one-and-a-half-year-old child at the time of the interview. However, what happened after childbirth was the opposite of his expectations, to the point that he would not be able to explain how exactly he turned into a "dis-involved" father. The infant was exclusively breastfed and therefore slept with his mother, who, from a "twelve-hour-a-day working woman," radically transformed into a "full-time mother." The father recalls that, as time passed, the child's dependence on the mother increased instead of fading away:

> At first, I was there with both of them, but lately, less and less. Contrary to our progressive thoughts, it seems that things have naturally separated, I would say. Life, society, and my situation…all these show that stereotypes about women and men still hold meaning, even though I have been very critical of them, and I still am. I also struggle a lot to divide my time between work and home. The child falls asleep at 9 p.m., I get home later than that, and leave very early the next morning, so there are days when we don't see each other. This hurts a lot, and I try to squeeze out as much time as I can from the office and rush back home, at least to see him and spend a little time together. Somehow, I feel like I missed the first part of his life, when it was so vital for him to have support from both parents, but…at the end of the day, one of us has to work and pay the bills. (activist, 38)

Similar to other narratives, this interview indicates that "involved fathering" is often seen as the amount of time spent with the child. However, this time cannot be planned or measured, and it is experienced differently at each stage of the child's life.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, our analysis aligns with previous research on several key aspects. First, our fieldwork confirms that middle-class involved fathering is shaped by a series of factors, including: (a) personal paid work arrangements and obligations, i.e., fathers with a flexible schedule or who work remotely were more readily available when help was needed; (b) fathers' perception of mothers' attitudes, demands, and willingness to ask for or accept father's involvement in care tasks; and, even more importantly, (c) the needs of the infant, especially in the cases of children with disabilities or with complex medical needs. Second, our findings support the idea of a dynamic and asynchronous gap between cultural meanings and social practices concerning fathering, which, as part of their societal context, may mutually reinforce as well as contradict each other: "social practices may lag behind the images that are propagated, but they may also undergo change" (Oechsle et al., 2012, p. 13). In this vein, our interviews suggest that the socially desirable image of "involved fatherhood" does not entirely overlap with the concrete enactment of involved fathering. Third, our analysis is consistent with the scholarship on gender equality in domestic life that differentiates between housework and child care as conceptually and methodologically distinct (Doucet, 2017, pp. 13–14). Our interviewees' involvement in child care also significantly differs from their responsibilities in household chores (such as cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, laundry, etc.). Fourth, our analysis aligns with previous research that problematises fathering as a learning process, through which fathers actively engage in socially instituted (family) relationships and search for informational content that they consider accurate. Therefore, fathers do not simply follow a clearly defined set of instructions for proper fathering. Instead, from a relational perspective, men become fathers and constantly learn how to do fathering through dynamic, interactive information gathering and lived experiences.

At the same time, our work diverges from most research that mainly focuses on "caring masculinities" and "intimate fathering" to explain current changes in fathers' involvement in child care across different contexts (Dermott, 2003; Takács, 2020). Instead of trying to identify specific features of the Romanian ideal-typical middle-class "involved father," our analysis adopts a relational perspective (Doucet, 2017; Kremer, 2007; Tronto, 2013) and shows that fathers can be involved in care tasks to various extents, from occasional help to full-time availability. This highlights the genuinely performative nature of "doing" fathering, which constantly shifts along the continuum of noninvolvement–involvement–disinvolvement–reinvolvement, as a fluid process that is difficult to quantify. Moreover, "equal parenting" as a process cannot be defined by a measurable "equal" distribution of child care tasks, which explains why "involved fathering" does not necessarily overlap with "equal parenting."

Overall, our fieldwork encompasses situations where fathers are highly involved in child care tasks and consistently present in their children's lives. Also, we noticed that the more mothers expect and explicitly ask their partners to get engaged in care activities, the more fathers become involved. Subsequent research on larger samples is needed to validate and further analyse this potential pattern. Concerning "equal parenting," our interviewees' narratives show that, at least regarding infant care, as a rule, mothers hold the cognitive and managerial responsibility of accounting for children's needs and ensuring that they are comprehensively and timely addressed. Fathers might assist mothers in making decisions and organising care work, but these are not their prerogatives. This unsurprisingly reinforces gendered, asymmetric parental roles. The managerial burden rests primarily on mothers, even if specific tasks were delegated to and performed by fathers. When comparing fathering to mothering, our interviewees refer to themselves as genuinely

"different" and have an understanding of equality as difference (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007), despite Romanian child care policies promoting equality as sameness. Although it was neither explicitly introduced in our conversations nor spontaneously referred to as a desirable goal, the questioning of "equal" gendered parenting subtly emerged from fathers' repeated mentions of the biological differences between mothers and fathers, as well as their own identification with "masculinity."

From a conceptual perspective, equal parenting cannot be measured, but it can be narrated (Doucet, 2015, p. 233). Also, working with the sameness/difference dichotomy reinforces the idea that denying the gendered differences between fathering and mothering does not pave the way to equality in parenting. Instead, it directly depends on how conjugal partners build their relationship and daily integrate their roles as parents, while supporting each other, sharing responsibilities, and acknowledging each other's voice in a constant dialogue as "different but equals" (Cavell, 2003; Théry, 1998). Analysing empirical findings through this conceptual lens shows that our sample includes some cases of equal parenting, where conjugality and parenting roles neither exclude nor include each other. Nevertheless, in most narrated cases, at least during the first months of the infants' lives, parents' conjugal relationship tends to be completely reduced to or even replaced by the parental relationship. Accordingly, women become completely absorbed in mothering, while fathers retain the option of embracing a "nesting" role. Despite being fully engaged in infant care, these fathers often play a "supportive" role in parenting, particularly with newborns and infants. Similar to Matryoshka dolls, they assume responsibilities that cover the life of the nuclear family, and they look after the mother, who, in turn, fully concentrates on the infant. When this occurs, conjugal partners become solely parents with asymmetric parental responsibilities.

Our analysis has entirely concentrated on the fluidity of the fathering process and its interplay with (un)equal parenting, aiming to capture these within our interviewees' narratives. However, it also has inherent limitations. Building on fathers' narratives, our inquiry neither includes a direct observation of their practices nor a comparison with mothers' narratives. Moreover, the focus on infant care experiences could be expanded to include toddler- and child care-related parental responsibilities. Noteworthy developments could involve greater variation in terms of family structures, such as situations of single fathers, those who raise adopted children, fathers of children from previous relationships, or same-sex fathers. Although not considered in this analysis, our fieldwork contains significant ethnic variation that could be explored in a future intersectional approach, highlighting the intertwined roles of gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and ethnicity in shaping parental responsibilities. These are just a few examples of potential new research directions that would undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the Romanian case, as part of the broader Central and Eastern European context.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all the fathers who kindly agreed to participate in our study and share their stories of fathering experiences. We also acknowledge the help of our friends and colleagues in facilitating our interviews, as well as the invaluable assistance of our students, Adriana Creangă and Denisa Moldovan. The final version of the manuscript benefited from the attentive and proficient proofreading offered by Heidi Samuelson. We also want to sincerely thank the co-editors of this thematic issue, Hana Haskova, Alenka Švab, Judit Takács, and Ivett Szalma, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and highly generous feedback, which helped us improve our article.

Funding

The publication of this article received funding for proofreading from the SEED Grant of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 2024–2025. Réka Geambașu's work was supported by the Bolyai János Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Babeș-Bolyai University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality and privacy restrictions in line with the ethical standards of qualitative social research.

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs tools were not used to generate this article. Grammarly was used to improve language quality prior to professional proofreading.

References

Akácsos, E., & Geambașu, R. (2024). A nemi egyenlőség "megrekedt forradalma." Az erdélyi magyarok nemi egyenlőséggel kapcsolatos véleményei. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, *22*(1), 9–34. https://doi.org/10.17177/77171.290

Albrecht, C., Fichtl, A., & Redler, P. (2017). Fathers in charge? Parental leave policies for fathers in Europe. *IFO DICE Report*, *15*(1), 49–51. https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/dice-report-2017-1-albrecht-fichtl-redler-march.pdf

Allen, J. L. (2021). *Performative parenting: Social norms and fathers' use of parental leave entitlements* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Cambridge Repository]. https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.82595

Bădescu, G., Kivu, M., Popescu, R., Rughiniş, C., Sandu, D., & Voicu, O. (2007). *Barometrul de opinie publică. Viața în cuplu*. Soros Foundation Romania. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gabriel-Badescu-2/publication/327630960_Barometrul_de_Opinie_Publica_Viata_in_cuplu/links/5b9a7d06299bf13e602b0ed2/Barometrul-de-Opinie-Publica-Viata-in-cuplu.pdf

Băluță, I., & Tufiș, C. (2023). Preaching the 'traditional family' in the Romanian Parliament: The political stakes and meanings of a hegemonic narrative. *East European Politics and Societies*, *38*(2), 616–638. https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231181069

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Cavell, S. (2003). *Pursuits of happiness: The Hollywood comedy of remarriage* (10th ed.). Harvard University Press.

Daly, M. (2020). *Gender inequality and welfare states in Europe*. Edward Elgar.

Dermott, E. (2003). The 'intimate father': Defining paternal involvement. *Sociological Research Online*, *8*(4), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.859

Dohotariu, A. (2015). The unmarried couple in post-communist Romania: A qualitative sociological approach. *The History of the Family*, *20*(4), 579–592. http://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2015.1012645

Dohotariu, A. (2018). Parental leave provision in Romania between inherited tendencies and legislative adjustments. *Symposion*, *5*(1), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.5840/symposion2018514

Doucet, A. (2006). *Do men mother? Fathering, care, and domestic responsibility*. University of Toronto Press.

Doucet, A. (2009). Dad and baby in the first year: Gendered responsibilities and embodiment. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *624*(1), 78–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334069

Doucet, A. (2014). Fathering, feminism(s), gender, and sexualities: Connections, tensions, and new pathways. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *6*(4), 355–373. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12051

Doucet, A. (2015). Parental responsibilities: Dilemmas of measurement and gender equality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *77*(1), 224–242. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12148

Doucet, A. (2017). The ethics of care and the radical potential of fathers 'Home alone on leave': Care as practice, relational ontology, and social justice. In M. O'Brien & K. Wall (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on work–life balance and gender equality: Fathers on leave alone* (pp. 11–28). Springer.

Dumănescu, L. (2012). *Familia românească în comunism*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

European Union. (2019). Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work–life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 188. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj

Faircloth, C. (2013). *Militant lactivism? Attachment parenting and intensive motherhood in the UK and France*. Berghahn Books.

Fodor, É., Glass, C., Kawachi, J., & Popescu, L. (2002). Family policy and gender in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *35*(4), 475–490. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(02)00030-2

Gabb, J. (2012). Embodying risk: Managing father–child intimacy and the display of nudity in families. *Sociology*, *47*(4), 639–654. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512448558

Geambașu, R. (2024). *Nők a megrekedt forradalomban. Elméletek, fogalmak és erdélyi esettanulmányok a nők fizetett és fizetetlen munkájáról*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

Grau-Grau, M., Las Heras, M., & Riley Bowles, H. (Eds.). (2022). *Engaged fatherhood for men, families and gender equality, healthcare, social policy, and work perspectives*. Springer.

Grünberg, L. (Ed.). (2019). *Barometrul de gen: România 2018*. Editura Hecate.

Hašková, H., & Saxonberg, S. (2016). The revenge of history: The institutional roots of post-communist family policy in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. *Social Policy & Administration*, *50*(5), 559–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12129

Hobson, B. (2014). *Work–life balance: The agency and capabilities gap*. Oxford University Press.

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2012). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Penguin.

Ion, I. E., Popescu, R., & Grünberg, L. (2025). Home-based parental involvement: Intersections of gender, childcare, families and the economy in post-socialist Romania. In S. L. Blair & T. J. Madigan (Eds.), *Education and the family: Parental involvement practices in the home and school. Contemporary perspectives in family research*, 29. (pp. 107–134). Emerald Publishing.

Kligman, G. (1998). *The politics of duplicity*. University of California Press.

Kovács, B. (2015). Romanian families: Changes and continuities over recent decades. In Z. Rajkai (Ed.), *Family and social change in socialist and post-socialist societies: Change and continuity in Eastern Europe and East Asia* (pp. 250–299). Brill Academic Publishing.

Kovács, B. (2018). *Family policy and the organisation of childcare hierarchies of care ideals*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kravchenko, Z., & Robilă, M. (2015). Fatherhood and fathering in Eastern Europe. In J. L. Roopnarine (Ed.), *Fathers across cultures*: *The importance, roles, and diverse practices of dads* (pp. 108–131). Praeger.

Kremer, M. (2007). *How welfare states care: Culture, gender and parenting in Europe*. Amsterdam University Press.

Machin, A. J. (2015). Mind the gap: The expectation and reality of involved fatherhood. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, *13*(1), 36–59.

Martínez-Pastor, J.-I., Jurado-Guerrero, T., Fernández-Lozano, I., & Castellanos-Serrano, C. (2024). Caring fathers in Europe: Toward universal caregiver families? *Gender, Work & Organization*, *31*(5), 1616–1638. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12948

Mureșan, C. (2008). Cohabitation, an alternative for marriage in contemporary Romania: A life-table description. *Demografia*, *51*, 36–65.

Nagy, B., Geambașu, R., Gergely, O., & Somogyi, N. (2023). 'In this together'? Gender inequality associated with home-working couples during the first COVID lockdown. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *30*(3), 1059–1079. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12971

Neaga, D. E., & Ștefan, B. (2021, May 21). *Changing masculinities? Dadfluencing in Romania: Between feminism, conservatism and capitalism* [Paper presentation]. The 14th International Conference "Challenges of the Knowledge Society," Bucharest, Romania.

O'Brien, M., & Wall, K. (2017). Fathers on leave alone: Setting the scene. In M. O'Brien & K. Wall (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on work–life balance and gender equality: Fathers on leave alone* (pp. 1–10). Springer.

Oates-Indruchová, L., Asztalos Morell, I., Dudová, R., Formánková, L., Geambașu, R., Hašková, H., Hawkins, M., & Vohlídalová, M. (2024). What happened to my time during the Covid-19 lockdown? Parents' subversive temporal regime strategies and their potential beyond the pandemic. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *31*(4), 492–509. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068241297700

Oechsle, M., Müller, U., & Hess, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Fatherhood in late modernity: Cultural images, social practices, structural frames*. Barbara Budrich.

Oláh, L. S., & Fratczak, E. (Eds.). (2013). *Childbearing, women's employment and work–life balance policies in contemporary Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Orloff, A. S., & Laperrière, M. (2021). Gender. In D. Béland, S. Leibfried, K. J. Morgan, H. Obinger, & C. Pierson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the welfare state* (2nd ed., pp. 346–363). Oxford University Press.

Pop, C. (2016). *Clase sociale în România. Metodologia inegalităților*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.

Pustułka, P., & Sikorska, M. (2023). Familial pragmatism: Modern families navigating the private/public junction. *Problemy Polityki Społecznej. Social Policy Issues*, *61*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.31971/pps/174559

Saxonberg, S. (2014). *Gendering family policies in post-communist Europe: A historical institutional analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sikorska, M. (2016). From 'absent father' to 'involved father': Changes in the model of fatherhood in Poland and role of mothers—'Gatekeepers.' In I. Crespi & E. Ruspini (Eds.), *Balancing work and family in a changing society: The fathers' perspective* (pp. 163–175). Basingstoke.

Slovenski, I., Wells, N., & Evans, D. (2024). Patterns of cesarean birth rates in public and private hospitals of Romania. *Discover Public Health*, *21*, Article 246. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12982-024-00378-5

Sztáray Kézdy, É., & Drjenovszky, Z. (2021). Gondoskodásviszonyok a gyermekükkel otthon lévő apák családjaiban Magyarországon. *Socio.hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, *11*(4), 131–161. https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2021.4.138

Takács, J. (2013). Unattainable desires? Childbearing capabilities in early 21st century Hungary. In L. S. Oláh & E. Fratczak (Eds.), *Childbearing, women's employment and work–life balance policies in contemporary Europe* (pp. 179–206). Palgrave Macmillan.

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Théry, I. (1998). *Couple, filiation et parenté aujourd'hui. Le droit face aux mutations de la famille et de la vie privée*. Éditions Odile Jacob/La Documentation française.

Théry, I. (1999). L'énigme de l'égalité. Mariage et différence des sexes dans 'À la recherche du bonheur.' *Esprit (1940-), 252*(5), 128–147. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24280323

Tronto, J. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality and justice*. New York University Press.

Verloo, M., & Lombardo, E. (2007). Contested gender equality and policy variety in Europe: Introducing a critical frame analysis approach. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Multiple meanings of gender equality: A critical frame analysis of gender policies in Europe* (pp. 21–49). Central European University Press.

Vincent, C., & Ball, S. (2007). 'Making up' the middle-class child: Families, activities, and dispositions. *Sociology*, *41*(6), 1061–1077. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507082315

Zaharijević, A., Wawrzyniak, J., & Dohotariu, A. (2023). Who cares for families? Narrative(s) of return in postsocialist Europe. *East European Politics and Societies*, *38*(2), 576–593. https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231198881

About the Authors



Anca Dohotariu is an associate professor in the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bucharest. Her publications, research interests, and university courses are at the crossroads of disciplines of family studies, care research, social and family policies, public policy analysis, and gender research.



Réka Geambașu is a sociologist affiliated with Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, and ELTE CERS, Budapest. Her research interests include labour inequalities between men and women, the social construction of motherhood, and female entrepreneurship.



Cristina Rat is a lecturer in the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, where she teaches courses on class inequality and social policies. Her research concerns the relation between welfare states and inequality, with a focus on poverty and social marginalization.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10861
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10861

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Involved Fathers and Intensive Parenting in Czechia: Norms and Fathers' Contextualised Practices

Jana Klímová Chaloupková [1] and **Hana Hašková** [2]

[1] Values and Politics Department, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic
[2] Gender and Sociology Department, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

Correspondence: Jana Klímová Chaloupková (jana.chaloupkova@soc.cas.cz)

Submitted: 25 July 2025 **Accepted:** 28 October 2025 **Published:** 15 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

Intensive parenting norms that emphasise high parental investment to optimise child development are increasingly prevalent in advanced economies. Although motherhood has been widely studied, fatherhood remains underexplored, especially in contexts like Czechia, where support for shared childcare between parents is limited. Using data from the Czech ISSP 2022 and qualitative interviews with Czech middle-class fathers and mothers (2022–2024), this study examines how intensive parenting norms shape the views and practices of fathers' involvement in childcare. The survey results show similar levels of support for intensive parenting norms among men and women, irrespective of expectations about paternal care. The interviews reveal three intensive parenting patterns: maternal-specialised, stimulation-oriented, and partially egalitarian. Although mothers bear the main emotional and logistical burden, fathers' participation in childcare remains selective. The findings highlight how intensive parenting norms are enacted in gendered ways, shaped by persistently gendered cultural and institutional constraints.

Keywords

fatherhood; intensive parenting; involved fathers; mixed-methods study

1. Introduction

This study explores the interplay between two main trends that have shaped contemporary parenting norms over recent decades: rising intensive parenting expectations and the growing ideal of "involved fatherhood" (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000), reflected in a marked increase in the time devoted to childcare by mothers

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

and fathers (Craig et al., 2014; Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016). Intensive parenting norms, originally conceptualised as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), are increasingly understood as universal parenting standards (Faircloth, 2014; Gauthier et al., 2021). They require parents to prioritise the needs of the child, invest extensive time and money in them, and follow expert advice to ensure the optimal development and future success of the child (Ennis, 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Gauthier et al., 2021; Hays, 1996). In parallel, shifting gender expectations have promoted the ideal of involved or nurturant fatherhood. Fathers are increasingly expected to take part in daily childcare and be emotionally engaged and build close relationships with their children (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000; McGill, 2014).

Together, these developments raise the question of how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers and their participation in daily care. Prior studies show that the endorsement of intensive parenting norms often coexists with competing gender beliefs—either with gender-essentialist beliefs that position mothers as naturally better suited to caregiving or with egalitarian beliefs that emphasise the shared responsibility of both parents (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Lankes, 2022). This pattern is also observed in the Czech context (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b). However, the link between the endorsement of intensive parenting norms and the actual participation of fathers in daily care remains underexplored.

Previous qualitative studies on intensive parenting in Czechia have predominantly focused on mothers, revealing a pronounced variation in manifestations of child-centred and time- and resource-intensive parenting practices. Interviews with mothers identified four intensive mothering repertoires, which differ in the emphasis on different forms of capital and in the extent to which they reflect gender-essentialist beliefs (Hašková & Dudová, 2025).

This study offers a novel contribution by examining how intensive parenting norms shape perceptions of fathers' involvement in childcare and fathers' childcare practices in Czechia. However, its contribution extends beyond the national level, as few studies have explicitly explored how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers' involvement in childcare. We examine whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' involvement in childcare, i.e., whether they reflect a shift towards less gendered parenting or whether they reinforce traditional divisions of roles within the family.

This study adopts a mixed-method design, combining quantitative analysis of nationally representative data from the Czech International Survey Programme (ISSP) 2022 with a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with Czech middle-class mothers and fathers. The survey data allow us to examine associations between support for intensive parenting and attitudes towards fathers' involvement in daily childcare and situate Czech attitudes within a broader European context. Qualitative interviews provide deeper insight into how middle-class mothers and fathers who endorse intensive parenting norms experience, negotiate, and make sense of father caregiving roles. By integrating these approaches, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how intensive parenting norms relate to fathers' participation in childcare, revealing both broad patterns in attitudes and the nuanced ways these norms are interpreted and enacted in everyday lives. The study contributes to the literature by showing how, in the Czech context, intensive parenting is enacted in gendered ways and how fathers' involvement is shaped by the interplay between cultural expectations and institutional constraints.

2. The Czech Context

Czechia provides a particularly relevant setting for studying the relationship between intensive parenting norms and fathers' involvement. It exemplifies broader patterns across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where intensive parenting ideals have emerged within policy frameworks that continue to prioritise maternal care. Like many other CEE countries, Czechia underwent major social and economic transformations in the 1990s, shifting from a centrally planned to a free market economy, and from policies supporting mothers' employment to gendered refamilialist policies marked by a significant drop in the number of childcare facilities and the introduction of other policies that undermined mothers' employment and enforced the traditional gendered division of work (Hašková & Saxonberg, 2016; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2006). Overall, CEE countries are characterised by low cultural (Lomazzi, 2022) and weak policy support for fathers' caregiving and a limited emphasis placed on childcare services for children under the age of three. However, the specific policy mix varies among CEE countries, as there is more than one family policy model in the region (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020, 2023).

Even among CEE countries, Czechia ranks among those with the lowest provision of childcare services for children under the age of three (OECD, 2025). Its policies are explicitly familialist, are aimed at privatising childcare (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020, 2023), and provide fathers with comparatively short and poorly paid leave, which, together with the lengthy leave periods for mothers, limits the potential to support fathers in caregiving and transform gender norms (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020). Czech family policies combine limited availability of childcare for children under the age of three and low policy support for fathers' caregiving with extended parental leave that reinforces maternal primacy in early childcare (Hašková & Dudová, 2017; Nešporová, 2019a). Fathers are discouraged from taking parental leave due to its inflexibility, the flat-rate benefit, the structure of the Czech tax system, and the absence of nontransferable paid parental leave rights. Although the norm of full-time motherhood and breadwinner fatherhood during a child's early years remains predominant, expectations for higher father involvement in childcare have increased in Czechia in recent decades (Kuchařová et al., 2020).

CEE countries have also seen the increasing spread of intensive parenting ideals, shaped by the expansion of market-driven childrearing services and increasing parental concern with developing children's human capital (Gauthier et al., 2021; Kutrovátz & Nikolett, 2022; Lojdová & Manea, 2025; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020; Volejníčková Marková, 2024). These processes have been reinforced by the privatisation and diversification of preschool services (Jarkovská et al., 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020) and increased selectivity in schooling (Kogan et al., 2012; Straková et al., 2017). Recent findings show that support for intensive parenting norms in Czechia is moderate overall, with no significant gender differences. These norms are most strongly reflected in the emphasis on stimulating children's development, particularly through organised activities, which are endorsed by nearly two-thirds of the population (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b).

Czech time-use data show that mothers spend more time than fathers on basic childcare, while the gender gap in interactive care, such as talking and playing, is smaller and narrows as children grow. Higher-educated fathers spend more time in childcare than those with lower education, but the gender gap persists, as higher-educated mothers also increase their involvement (Klímová Chaloupková & Pospíšilová, 2024). In addition, increased caregiving time is associated with higher perceived time stress among mothers, but not fathers, suggesting that caregiving remains socially constructed as a maternal duty, whereas paternal involvement is often experienced as voluntary (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025a).

3. Theoretical Background and Previous Studies

3.1. Intensive Parenting Norms

Intensive parenting norms are commonly understood as a multidimensional set of beliefs that emphasise child-centredness, stimulating children's development, often through organised activities, personal responsibility for children's well-being, reliance on expert advice (Gauthier et al., 2021), and viewing parenting as demanding yet fulfilling (Liss et al., 2013). While originally framed as a maternal responsibility (Hays, 1996), recent studies show these norms can reflect both gender-essentialist or gender-egalitarian beliefs (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b; Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Lankes, 2022).

Even in the Czech context with rather conservative gender beliefs, support for intensive parenting norms is more associated with beliefs in shared family responsibilities than with support for maternal primacy in family responsibilities (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b). Still, about a third of those endorsing shared intensive parenting responsibilities believe that mothers are better suited for caregiving, highlighting the persistence of hybrid or transitional beliefs in Czechia (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b).

Prior quantitative studies have generally found limited gender differences in the endorsement of intensive parenting norms (Ishizuka, 2019; Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b), though women tend to score higher on parental responsibility (Gauthier et al., 2021). Findings from Sweden, in contrast, suggest that acceptance of intensive parenting norms is more prevalent among women than men (Mollborn & Billingsley, 2024).

Qualitative studies show that mothers and fathers internalise and enact these norms differently. In a study of Czech parents, Nešporová (2019b) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to enact elements of intensive parenting and often viewed their care as irreplaceable, reflecting their role as primary caregivers during early childhood. Fathers, by contrast, showed fewer signs of enacting intensive parenting practices (Nešporová, 2019b). Similarly, Shirani et al. (2012), in a study from the UK, found that while both mothers and fathers valued parental influence on child development, fathers were less shaped by expert parenting discourse and relied more on "common sense." Mothers, by contrast, felt a stronger moral responsibility and greater anxiety about meeting parenting standards (Shirani et al., 2012). In addition, a study from Belgium shows that mothers are more likely than fathers to internalise societal pressure to be a perfect parent, even when they do not personally endorse intensive parenting norms (Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Consequently, despite increasing support for shared family responsibilities (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b), intensive parenting norms may not necessarily translate into (preferences for) higher fathers' involvement in daily caregiving, which may still be seen as primarily the mother's domain (Nešporová, 2019b). These tensions between egalitarian ideals and the persisting primacy of maternal responsibility highlight the need to examine how fathers' involvement is conceptualised and enacted.

3.2. Involved Fatherhood and the Dimensions of Paternal Involvement

The ideal of "involved fatherhood" or "intimate fathering" emphasises fathers' emotional engagement and participation in daily care, contrasting with the traditional provider role (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000). Fathers' direct involvement with children is commonly described through three dimensions: engagement

(direct interaction with children, such as feeding or playing), accessibility (being physically and emotionally available), and responsibility (organising care, doctor visits, or school decisions; Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Nevertheless, this model remains fluid and diverse, and intimate fathering/involved fatherhood depends more on emotional engagement than on time spent together (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000).

In addition to active involvement with the child, the empirical evidence suggests that economic provision remains a key part of the way in which men see themselves as involved fathers (Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Shirani et al., 2012). This may be particularly relevant in the context of intensive parenting, which often requires significant economic investment in future child success, for example, through private schooling or organised extracurricular activities.

Prior research shows that intensive parenting operates as a moral ideal that guides parental aspirations but is enacted selectively, often limited by material resources and institutional settings (Faircloth, 2014; Minnotte, 2023; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Although fathers increasingly endorse intensive parenting ideals, they often express them through selective forms of engagement—such as educational, leisure, or emotionally supportive activities—rather than routine caregiving (Dermott, 2017; Shirani et al., 2012). Moreover, studies of fathers' involvement show that workplace and policy contexts crucially influence men's ability to participate in care, with long hours and inflexible jobs limiting engagement (McGill, 2014).

To address our overarching question—whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' engagement in childrearing—we examine two interrelated aspects of this relationship. First, we explore how intensive parenting norms shape attitudes towards fathers' involvement, that is, whether they align with egalitarian or traditional expectations about the division of childcare. In doing so, we also situate Czech attitudes in a broader European context. Understanding attitudinal patterns is essential, as norms set the moral and cultural boundaries within which parenting practices unfold. Second, we explore how these norms are enacted in practice concerning fathers' involvement and under what conditions intensive parenting norms reinforce or challenge gendered divisions of daily care.

4. Data and Methods

This study applies a convergent mixed-methods design, combining analyses of survey and interview data. The quantitative analysis explores general patterns in attitudes across the Czech population, while the qualitative analysis provides in-depth insight into how intensive parenting norms shape practices of fathers' involvement in caregiving.

4.1. The Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analyses draw on data from the ISSP 2022 (ISSP Research Group, 2025), a cross-national survey with recurring thematic modules. First, to situate Czech attitudes within an European context, we compared views on fathers' involvement in daily childcare and perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence across all European countries available in the 2022 international ISSP dataset (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked: "Please consider a family with a father and a mother raising a five-year-old child. In your opinion, who should take care of the child on a daily basis?" The response options were: *mostly the mother*, *somewhat more the mother*, *both equally*, *somewhat more the father*, and *mostly the father*. Perceived caregiving competence was

measured by agreement with the statement: "Fathers are equally capable of caring for children as mothers." The responses were measured on a 5-point scale.

Second, to examine the association between support for intensive parenting and attitudes towards fathers' involvement (see Table 1), we used the Czech ISSP 2022 sample (Hamplová & Klusáček, 2025). The Czech data include three additional questions covering key dimensions of intensive parenting norms: child-centredness, stimulation of child development, and reliance on expert advice (Gauthier et al., 2021; Liss et al., 2013). These are not available in internationally comparative data. These dimensions (in the order mentioned) were measured by agreement with the statements: "Children's needs should have priority over parents' needs," "Children should take part in various organised activities to reach their potential," and "Good parents should follow expert advice on child development." Responses were measured on a 5-point scale.

We estimated multinomial logistic regression models for the preferences that daily care be done *somewhat more by the mother* and *at least equally by the father* (reference category: *mostly the mother*), based on agreement with the three key dimensions of intensive parenting norms and perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence. The analytical sample includes all respondents with valid answers to the questions on intensive parenting norms, perceptions of fathers' caregiving competence, and the preferred division of childcare (N = 1,225: 496 men, 729 women). A robustness check limited to parents of minors is shown in the Supplementary Table S3. Models controlled for education, age, number and age of children, partnership status, and work status, which are expected to be associated with agreement with intensive parenting norms and the preferred gender division of daily childcare (Begall et al., 2023; Gauthier et al., 2021; McGill, 2014). Models were estimated separately for women and men to capture potential gender differences, as intensive parenting norms may have different meanings for mothers and fathers (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). In addition, preliminary analyses also revealed gender differences in these associations. For descriptive analyses using Czech ISSP 2022 data, we applied post-stratification weights. For international comparisons, we used a combined design and post-stratification weights to account for differences in sampling designs across countries.

4.2. The Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis draws on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022–2024 focusing on parenting. We interviewed 21 mothers and eight fathers (among them one couple; parents interviewed separately), each with at least one child aged 6–12. Participants were selected using snowball and purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of mothers and fathers who adhere to the norms of intensive parenting (Ennis, 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996).

The resulting sample was homogenous, with most participants university-educated, living with a partner, and belonging to the middle or upper-middle class. All fathers were employed full-time, while some mothers had not yet returned to employment or worked part-time, occasionally, or full-time. About half of the participants resided in large cities and half in small towns or villages, and had one to three children. The interviews covered parenting practices, the division of labour in the family, combining childcare with paid work, decisions regarding childcare institutions, schools, and extracurricular activities, parenting expert knowledge, ideals, emotions, and self-assessments. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet locations and lasted 60–90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudonymised, coded, and

analysed using Atlas.ti software. Participants provided informed consent for the interviews to be used for research purposes.

The semi-structured interviews made it possible to address the central theme of parenting while providing the flexibility to explore topics that participants deemed significant. The homogeneity of the sample enabled a focused examination of the parenting of higher-educated, partnered, middle-class parents and saturation in the basic analytical categories. Data collection and analysis were conducted using Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, which employs abstraction by integrating conceptualisation into the description, focuses on narrative, and aims to create an interpretive framework that reflects subjective realities. The strength of the constructivist grounded theory approach is its ability to produce an analytical narrative (or narratives) with explanatory and predictive power. The initial coding of the interviews involved categorising relevant sections into thematic groups and identifying new topics that emerged during the interviews. We then grouped the codes and explored the relationships between them, mainly focusing on categories interlinking narratives on intensive parenting norms and fathering. In this study, we focused on the interviews with fathers and on the coded sections of the interviews with mothers that concerned their partners and especially (but not exclusively) their fathering practices (or lack thereof).

The imbalance between the number of mothers and fathers interviewed resulted from the sampling design. We firstly interviewed mothers with a high level of time investment in childcare who practised parenting in accordance with the norms of intensive parenting and asked them to refer us to other parents with similar profiles or who used different parenting practices but adhered to the norms of intensive parenting. This approach enabled us to interview mothers with diverse styles of intensive mothering (Hašková & Dudová, 2025). However, the interviewed mothers only recommended other mothers. We subsequently focused on recruiting fathers but got few recommendations for other fathers from our interviewees—likely because fatherhood remains less discussed than motherhood in individual social networks in Czechia, and because fathering practices may be more hidden from outside observers than mothering. In Czechia, mothers are mostly the ones who interrupt their careers because of parenthood, attend children's clubs, and perform most of the daily childcare (Klímová Chaloupková & Pospíšilová, 2024). The smaller proportion of fathers among the interviewees is a limitation of this study, which could reinforce the perspective of mothers and marginalise the perspective of fathers in the analysis. The presented analysis is therefore based primarily on the interviews with fathers, which are analysed in relation to the interviews with mothers.

5. Results

5.1. Population-Level Attitudes Toward Fathers' Involvement in Childcare and Intensive Parenting

The ISSP 2022 data indicate that caregiving expectations in Czechia remain gendered, with fathers still largely viewed as secondary caregivers. Over half of respondents believe that mothers should take greater responsibility for daily childcare in families with pre-school children, while only 46% support equal sharing between parents. Although Czechia is not among the most traditional countries in this regard—such as Bulgaria or Slovakia—it also does not align with the strongly egalitarian norms prevalent in many Nordic and Western European countries, where equal division of care is widely expected (Figure 1). These patterns are reflected in beliefs about gendered caregiving competence: About half of the Czech respondents agree that mothers are better suited than fathers to caregiving, compared to roughly 20% in Norway, France, or

Germany. Still, Czechia remains less gender-essentialist than some other post-socialist countries, such as Hungary (59%), Slovakia (63%), and Bulgaria (71%).

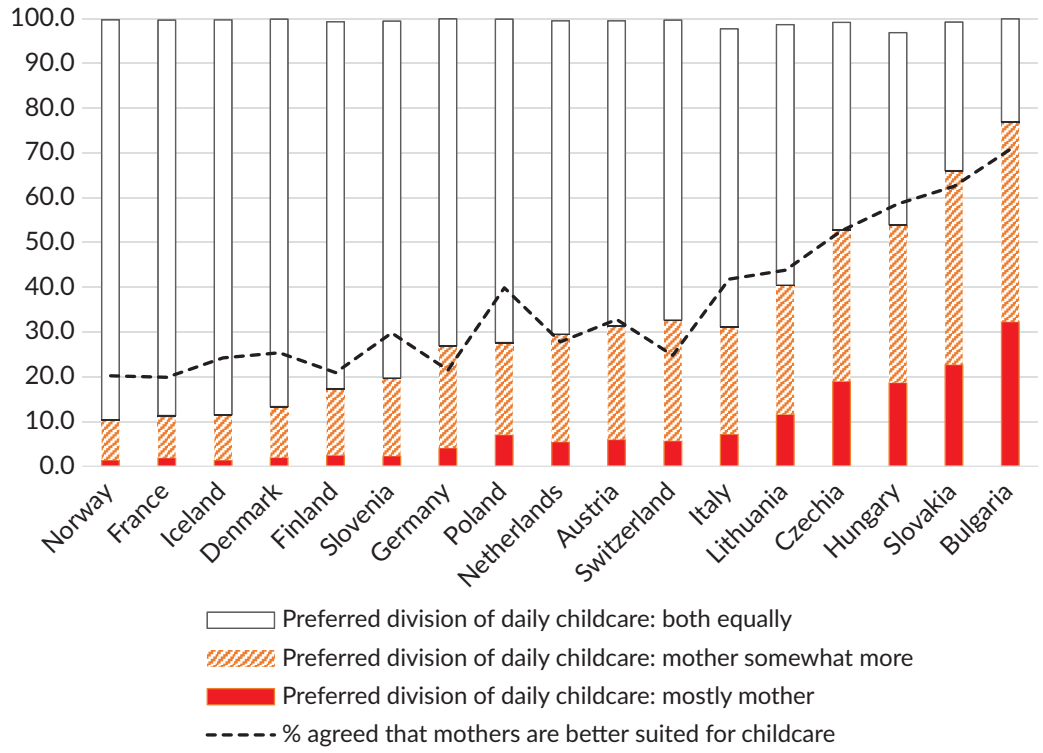


Figure 1. Attitudes on the daily division of childcare and gendered childcare competence in a comparative perspective. Notes: Based on ISSP 2022, using weights; responses referred to a family with a 5-year-old child; responses indicating "mostly the fathers" complete the total to 100%.

While daily childcare primarily remains associated with mothers in Czechia, if it comes to other domains such as play, leisure, teaching, behaviour, emotional support, and role modelling, Czech ISSP 2022 data show the prevailing norm favours equal parental involvement (see Supplementary File, Table S1). At the same time, a strong majority still sees financial provision to be the father's role. Taken together, these findings show that Czechia reflects a partial and selective embrace of fathers' involvement: Fathers are increasingly seen as engaged parents, but not as equal caregivers.

Table 1 summarises how attitudes towards fathers' involvement in daily childcare relate to support for intensive parenting norms in Czechia. It presents the share of respondents within each attitudinal group on the daily division of childcare—those favouring primary maternal care, favouring somewhat more maternal care, or favouring equal sharing—who agree with each intensive parenting item. The results are shown separately for men and women to highlight gender differences.

The endorsement of intensive parenting norms does not necessarily translate into expectations of higher paternal involvement in daily childcare. For both men and women, support for child-centredness and for stimulating child development with organised activities does not significantly differ between those favouring primary maternal responsibility and those supporting shared childcare. However, views on expert-guided parenting vary by gender: among women, agreement is highest among those supporting maternal care (55%)

and lowest among those favouring equal responsibility (41%), while among men, differences across attitudes towards the division of daily childcare are not statistically significant.

Table 1. Support for intensive parenting norms and attitudes towards the division of daily childcare by gender.

	Men				Women			
Dimensions of intensive parenting norms	*Mother mostly*	*Mother somewhat more*	*Father at least equally*	*Total*	*Mother mostly*	*Mother somewhat more*	*Father at least equally*	*Total*
Child-centredness	56.4	48.9	48.80	50.2	43.8	44.7	47.8	46.0
Stimulation of child development	70.1	64.9	66.3	66.5	73.3	64.4	65.9	66.9
Expert-guidance	48.1	41.9	49.9	46.7	55.3	45.9	40.6	45.3*

Notes: Based on the Czech ISSP 2022, post-stratification weights; unweighted $N = 1{,}225$ (496 men, 729 women); * χ^2 tests $p < .05$; percentages show the share of respondents in each attitudinal group on the division of daily childcare who agree or strongly agree with each of the three key dimensions of intensive parenting norms; attitudes towards the division of daily childcare refer to a family with a five-year-old child; the column "Total" refers to the overall percentage of men and women (across all attitudinal groups) who agree or strongly agree with the given intensive parenting dimension.

To assess how support for intensive parenting norms relates to expectations about fathers' involvement in daily childcare while accounting for socio-demographic factors and beliefs about gendered caregiving competence, Figure 2 presents average marginal effects (AMEs) from multinomial logistic regressions estimated separately for men and women. Since beliefs about gendered caregiving competence proved to significantly affect the preference for fathers' involvement in daily childcare, Figure 2 also displays this relationship.

Full estimates from the multinomial logistic regressions, including odds ratios, are shown in the Supplementary File, Table S1. The regressions showed that beliefs about gendered caregiving competence are a strong predictor of the preferred division of daily childcare. Agreement that "a mother is better suited to childcare" reduces the preference for equal paternal involvement by about 0.23 ($p < 0.001$) for both genders. The effects of intensive parenting norms on attitudes towards the division of daily childcare vary by dimension and gender: among women, a stronger endorsement of stimulating child development increases support for maternal responsibility (AME = 0.07, $p < 0.10$), and a greater reliance on expert advice both increases support for maternal responsibility (AME = 0.07, $p < 0.05$) and decreases support for equal sharing (AME = −0.11, $p < 0.10$). In contrast, among men, the association between expert guidance and equal paternal involvement is positive but not significant (AME = 0.05), and the effect is even stronger among fathers (see Supplementary File, Table S3). For both women and men, endorsing child-centredness is not significantly related to the preferred division of childcare.

The regression results also revealed socio-demographic differences. Men and women with medium or high education are less likely than those with low education to prefer that only mothers should handle daily childcare. Childless women are less likely than mothers to support exclusive maternal care, while mothers with children up to age six are more likely to favour the "mostly the mother" option. In contrast, among men, we found no differences in views based on parental status (see Supplementary File, Table S1)

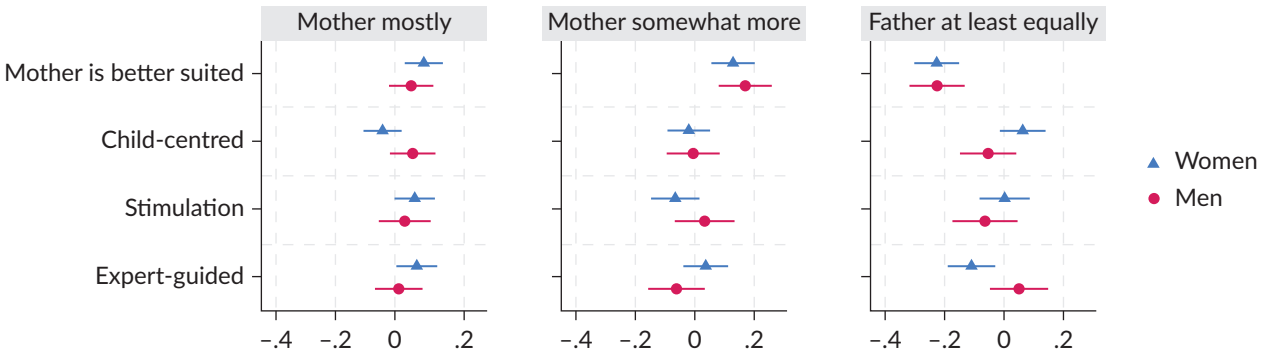


Figure 2. Effects of the endorsement of intensive parenting norms and of views on gendered competence in childcare on the preferred division of daily childcare. Notes: Average marginal effects of the preferred division of daily childcare, estimated from gender-specific multinomial logistic regression models (see Supplementary File, Table S2); controls include age, number and age of children, employment status, and partnership status; reference categories: disagreement with the statement that "a mother is better suited to childcare" and with the intensive parenting items.

In sum, Czech men and women endorse intensive parenting norms at similar levels, but this support does not lead to stronger expectations for fathers' involvement in daily childcare. Instead, these norms often coexist with traditional beliefs about mothers' primary responsibility for caregiving, suggesting that they may reinforce rather than challenge gendered divisions of childcare. However, the survey data only captures attitudes and does not reflect how these norms are enacted in everyday caregiving.

5.2. Intensive Parenting Norms in the Practices of Fathering: Qualitative Insights

The analysis of interviews with middle-class mothers and fathers in Czechia who endorse intensive parenting norms highlights four key themes that emerged from their narratives to explain how intensive parenting norms shape fathers' involvement in childcare: (a) the internalisation of responsibility for children's future success, (b) the pursuit of stimulation and expert-informed guidance, (c) the conditions that enable or constrain fathers' daily involvement in care, and (d) the role of peer networks. The interviews revealed diverse patterns of fathers' involvement in daily childcare, shaped by a combination of institutional constraints, personal values, and work conditions. Alongside maternal specialisation in childcare and a father's supportive role, we identified egalitarian parenting arrangements with high paternal involvement in daily childcare, as well as stimulation-oriented fathering focused on educational, extracurricular, or structured activities.

5.2.1. Responsibility

Although responsibility for children is a general feature of parenthood, the belief that parental influence will have a decisive impact on children's development is central to intensive parenting. All the interviewed parents felt a great responsibility for raising their children and believed that their actions would have a fundamental impact on how their children would turn out as adults and their children's future success:

> I believe that the time and energy I invest in children will have a significant positive impact on their functioning in society in the future. (Ladislav, father)

> A child becomes well or poorly behaved based on their parents' influence 90% of the time. Genetics certainly plays a role, but it's mainly how their parents raised them. (Kryštof, father)

Moreover, the interviewed fathers emphasised not only guiding their children and cultivating their children's talents but also self-regulating their own behaviour to provide an example of desired traits. They self-reflectively evaluated their own characteristics they were trying to change to become better fathers for their children, driven by a belief in their decisive responsibility for shaping their children's future:

> If I want to pass on a certain attitude towards life, it should be reflected in my behaviour as well. (Kryštof, father)

> We are really connected with my wife, and I think we work very organically together and discuss things…that's what children perceive very sensitively…it's actually that raising children is also raising myself….I come from a family where my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father all had a bit of a problem with being hot-tempered and choleric. I struggled with it myself. And I have overcome this beast….I also see this kind of hot-headedness in my sons…so I also see a role in…showing them the way out of that. (Ladislav, father)

5.2.2. Stimulation and Expert Guidance

While fathers agreed with their responsibility for their children's development, they differed in how to achieve it. These differing opinions were often justified by citing the "expert knowledge" that dominated in their reference groups, online sources, or personal values. Some prioritised investing time, money, networks, and skills to secure their children's admission to elite kindergarten, school, and extracurricular programmes that would strengthen their children's social networks and future prospects:

> At our school, many parents probably have ambitions that they pass on to their children, and then the children are like that….In the upper grades, I may need to study so that I can advise my daughter, but I don't mind. We knew it would be a more demanding school than average, but we chose it because it would give her a solid foundation for working life and probably also some connections, and it probably won't be a problem for her to get into university if she chooses one, which we both assume she will. There are children at that school who are more successful in their careers because it is difficult to get into that school, and it is a private school, and the children motivate each other a lot…to progress even faster in their knowledge and skills. By investing both time and money in her education, we are laying the foundations for her to obtain a university degree and find a career that she enjoys and that will also provide her with a reasonable living. (Pavel, father)

> I basically take care of the boy's free time. In our village, the kids…just have one club once a week and that's it….I see his friends just hanging out…there is plenty of trouble he could get into…so it's better that he's training five days a week….I think that collective sports are great for him…so he knows how to be part of a group and how to achieve goals…the question is whether he will get into an academic high school…it depends on me, how much time I put into the preparation….The mock tests can be downloaded from the internet….I will do the preparation with him myself. (Oliver, father)

Others have invested considerable financial and time resources to ensure that their children attend forest kindergartens and small, alternative "niche" schools that better match their ideas about their children's needs:

> We obviously must pay more for a forest kindergarten than if our children went to a regular state kindergarten, but we still consider it the best investment in their lives and their future….The elementary school is a small community school where everyone knows each other. That alone solves a lot of problems that schools normally struggle with, such as bullying, or simply someone falling behind, or someone talented not having the space to develop. (Ladislav, father)

Yet other fathers rejected the need to make a big investment in selective or "niche" schools and clubs as unnecessary or even counterproductive for a good upbringing and emphasised the importance of consciously spending time with their children for their development. However, most of them still shared the idea that children should attend at least some clubs to stimulate their development. Their children attended clubs, but instead of driving the children to selective clubs and schools every day or paying for private lessons, they focused on those close to home or at school:

> Those friends who would rather work four hours longer to earn money to pay for their sons' soccer coaches—I think that's stupid. I'd rather not work four hours and play soccer with my son myself. I probably won't make him a professional soccer player, just because of the connections and the networking that happens in those clubs, but playing with a ball and learning some coordination, I think I can manage that….I think it's good to have some kind of sport, some kind of artistic activity. (Radek, father)

Although fathers differed in how they wanted their children to develop, they shared a willingness to invest resources in cultivating their children in the chosen direction. Agreement on that direction with their partner was common, but the communication between partners on this ranged from just a basic agreement to having frequent discussions on the pros and cons of various parenting styles and strategies, and to seeking out expert knowledge on parenting:

> Because we are both intellectually oriented…we are used to finding out information…it was natural for me to want to find out more…look on the internet, etc….I liked the book *Raising Boys*…so I told her [his wife] about it….We both read a lot and are interested. (Ladislav, father)

Parental disagreement on such long-term, identity-forming, time-consuming, or financially demanding investments, such as choosing a school or preparing for entrance exams to an academic high school, could lead to rifts between parents in a couple, even though they otherwise agreed on their parenting. In line with the norm of child-centredness, the child's opinion was often interpreted as decisive:

> My wife and I have completely different views on this…she wanted an international high school [for their daughter]…then she [their daughter] could study and work all over the world….I don't like the concept of international schools….You don't belong anywhere…no roots….We had a complete disconnect. My wife sees international universities as the meaning of life….At the academic secondary school she [their daughter] attends, the students are not stupid or unmotivated, but they like sports…normal…if she [their daughter] wants to pursue an extremely ambitious goal, I will

> definitely support her, but I don't see that yet, and I don't see any reason to push her into it or stress her out, saying that she will have to study twice as hard to achieve this. (Kryštof, father)

5.2.3. Conditions for Genderising and De-Genderising Daily Care: Patterns of Fathers' Involvement

Child-centredness was a key theme in the parents' narratives about willingly changing their lives and decisions for the sake of their children. These adaptations were often gendered and varied, reflecting the age of the children, the values prioritised by the parents, and their conditions for parenting.

The institutional context—the limited availability of childcare services for children under the age of three and long parental leave without paid non-transferable months for both parents—leads most Czech families to a gendered arrangement, in which women across educational groups interrupt their professional careers for approximately three years for each child and men become the main breadwinners during this period (Kuchařová et al., 2020). For some fathers, this implies accepting the role of being just a woman's helper in daily childcare and parenting-related planning, eventually becoming more involved only when the child is older, mainly in playing and educating.

Intensive parenting norms often reinforce this gendered specialisation, when mothers' long parental leave translates into their reduced career ambitions and specialisation in raising their children, while their partner becomes the main breadwinner. In such families, the father's role is seen as supporting the mother's caregiving, and his breadwinning gains greater importance due to the mother's missing income. This division into separate gender roles is often rationalised as the most effective way to ensure a child's future success. The expansion of gender-essentialist middle-class intensive mothering in Czechia has been reinforced by the post-socialist gendered refamilialist policies that caused mothers to exit the labour market for long periods:

> I discuss everything about the children with him, but he doesn't call anywhere, search for information, plan, or drive the children to clubs and school…he's working all the time, from morning to night…pays everything…not that he wouldn't like to spend more time with the children, but he has no time….I was normally employed before the children…when the first child was born, I was on parental leave for three years and then extended it because another child was born….Then I didn't have the drive to return to paid work anymore….I'm busy with the children….In the afternoon, I take the children to their activities. If I went back to work, they wouldn't have these activities, no elite school…just dump the kids in…the closest school around. (Petra, mother)

However, intensive parenting norms were enacted both in the families that maintained separate gender roles and in the families in which both partners were significantly involved in daily childcare, even of young children. An egalitarian division of childcare was mainly driven by egalitarian attitudes within the couple and enabled when both parents—or at least the father—had work conditions supportive of a work–life balance. The interviewed fathers involved in daily childcare had either flexible working hours or free afternoons and could flexibly choose their place of work. Thus, time availability seems to be a significant condition for involved fathering:

> So that my wife and I could both work, after a few months after childbirth, we started taking turns every other day, so that one of us was working and the other was taking care of the baby. This was possible

> because we both worked from home most of the time. I had to arrange my schedule so that I worked every other day, which wasn't a problem….The limitation was that I couldn't attend some meetings, which led to missed business opportunities, but that may have happened anyway. (Pavel, father)

In some cases, the fathers' involvement in daily care was driven by a strong desire to be highly involved in the daily upbringing of their children, leading them to adapt their paid work. This is the case of Ladislav, who intentionally starts work in the early morning to keep his afternoons free for time with his children:

> As a man, I really see it as my privilege and, in a way, a luxury that men in other parts of the world or in other times don't have, either because they really need to work hard and earn every dollar, peso, or whatever, or they believe…that they have to work hard to support their families. And then they're not with their children. We have a few friends like that, who complain about how they want to be with their families, but they have one coach for this and another for that. (Ladislav, father)

Although Oliver did not share Pavel's gender-egalitarian ideas or Ladislav's desire to participate in the daily care of his children from an early age, he saw his primary role as stimulating his son's learning and leisure activities during school years. He also emphasised flexible working hours as essential for fulfilling this parental goal:

> I'm basically my own boss….I can leave work, take him to training, go back to work, and pick him up again an hour later. (Oliver, father)

Even in families with involved fathers, however, daily caregiving often remained gendered to some extent, both practically and symbolically. Mostly mothers were described as the main childcare managers and emotional supporters, while men generally retained the role of primary earners in the family and highlighted their involvement in educational, leisure, and extra-curricular activities. This suggests that stimulation-focused parenting in particular appears less tied to beliefs about the mother's primary role in daily caregiving:

> We are both very much involved and discuss things, but my wife is the one who initiates and manages the whole process. (Robert, father)

> My wife knows all the appointments….I take care of education and after-school activities. (Oliver–he)

> I am more for giving advice and helping with education; my wife discusses the feelings and emotions with our daughter. (Kryštof, father)

5.2.4. Fathers' Networks and Self-Affirmation

All the interviewed fathers dedicated a significant amount of their time to their children. Nevertheless, not all of them had been involved since early childhood, and their involvement varied—some focused on play, education, and development, while others participated independently in daily care. They declared there was no pressure from their peers to behave differently. According to them, in their reference groups, fathers' spending time with their children was either common or at least accepted. However, even in their networks, fathering itself was rarely a topic of discussion:

> Mothers discuss parenting, but fathers do not; our topics are not particularly profound (laugh); we tend to mention that we went on a trip with the children somewhere, but we don't discuss school preparations, problems, or our children's friends. (Pavel, father)

> Discussing parenting strategies is something that men aren't interested in. We talk about what school our children go to, how much it costs, whether the university is good, more technical things like that, but not sharing feelings, or how to deal with it when your daughter is crying. Instead, we tell funny stories about how your wife has gone crazy and wants to send the kids to this school that costs 2 million CZK a year, and "yeah, yeah, we went to that school too, but then we left," so we talk about it in the form of funny stories. (Kryštof, father)

> I think we're so stubborn that we [fathers] find it difficult to connect with each other in this way, that maybe we'd want to start talking about raising boys, but somehow it just doesn't work, I don't know. The conversation is kind of humorous; our first topic is politics or something like that. And often there must be at least one or two beers, and then the friends start to relax, and it starts to be about the children, right, but that's never the first topic among men. Society is just set up that way; it's expected of men, I don't know, like they have to have a shell around their emotions….Even in our social bubble and generation, I have friends who do not understand how to be involved with their boys until they are 4 and able to play with a ball, right?...I kind of miss the presence of like-minded fathers around me. (Ladislav, father)

The fathers' reflections on how fathers do not discuss parenting suggest that acceptance of engaged fatherhood as part of a man's identity remains more an option than the norm in Czechia and is only cautiously expressed. It is accepted as an option, but it is not necessarily shared within social networks. Unlike mothers (Hašková & Dudová, 2025), fathers have limited opportunities for the self-affirmation of their parenting strategies through peer interaction. Fathers' communication about fathering tends to focus on sharing information rather than sharing feelings associated with various aspects of fathering and the self-affirmation of one's fathering.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined whether and how intensive parenting norms facilitate or hinder fathers' involvement in childcare in Czechia, combining population-level survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews. The Czech ISSP 2022 data show that men and women endorse intensive parenting norms at similar levels. However, this shared endorsement does not translate into stronger expectations for paternal involvement in daily childcare. Instead, these norms often tend to reinforce traditional beliefs, assigning primary caregiving responsibility to mothers. These findings align with prior studies indicating that intensive parenting can reinforce, rather than challenge, gendered divisions of labour (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Nešporová, 2019b; Shirani et al., 2012). This study also nuances prior Czech findings on the prevalence of intensive parenting norms (Klímová Chaloupková, 2025b) by revealing that agreement with intensive parenting norms does not fully translate into egalitarian caregiving practices.

The qualitative evidence reveals the contexts in which intensive parenting norms can also encourage fathers' participation in daily childcare. Although fathers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for their children's

development and were willing to invest resources accordingly, they were engaged in caregiving in selective and often gendered ways. We identified three gendered patterns through which intensive fathering is enacted, each reflecting distinct relationships to the ideal of "involved fatherhood" (Dermott, 2017; Lamb, 2000).

In the maternal-specialised model of childcare, fathers focus on financial provision and occasional help, while mothers are primarily responsible for time-intensive childcare and stimulating child development—aligning with the model of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996). Mothers in this arrangement typically reduce their participation in the labour market, either temporarily or long-term, to fulfil caregiving demands. This pattern is reinforced by the Czech institutional context, which offers extended parental leave, limited childcare services for children under the age of 3, and a lack of incentives for fathers to use parental leave.

In egalitarian arrangements, fathers are more involved in daily childcare. But even here, mothers often take on the logistical, emotional, and cognitive burdens of care. A father's involvement often depends on having flexible, family-friendly working conditions and is driven by personal values. Moreover, it is often framed as a personal choice or privilege rather than a social norm. Although such involvement is accepted within fathers' social networks, it is rarely discussed in depth, limiting their mutual support and self-affirmation on parenting—unlike among mothers, whose reference groups more commonly validate their parenting approaches (Hašková & Dudová, 2025).

Finally, our analysis reveals a distinct model of stimulation-oriented intensive fathering, where fathers focus on educational, extracurricular, and leisure activities, while leaving routine and emotional care to mothers. This pattern seldom reduces the expectations on mothers or challenges the norm of fathers as primary breadwinners.

Overall, this study demonstrates how intensive parenting norms are enacted in deeply gendered ways. These findings underscore the importance of disaggregating the dimensions of fathers' involvement (Lamb, 2000) and of examining how they are differentially taken up in practice. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. Measuring each dimension of intensive parenting norms with a single item limits the conceptual depth and the assessment of internal consistency. The statistical analysis here examined attitudes at the population level, capturing broader cultural orientations while lacking data on parenting practices among current parents. The qualitative sample was limited to upper- and middle-class parents and was gender-imbalanced, with fewer fathers. Future research should integrate attitudinal and behavioural data on parents with dependent children to better capture the mechanisms that link the intensive parenting norms and caregiving practices of mothers and fathers. It should also adopt a more systematic focus on fathers and include parents from diverse social backgrounds and family forms.

Funding

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation under Grant No. 21–18014S ("Diversity of Childcare Attitudes and Parenting Practices: Their Sources and Outcomes") and RVO: 68378025 institutional support.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

ISSP 2022 data is available at: https://doi.org/10.4232/5.ZA10000.1.0.0.o. The Czech ISSP 2022 data is available at: https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/OLHS8X. Qualitative data is deposited in the CSDA depository (https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/KUB84Q), however, due to its sensitivity, access can be obtained only from the authors upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

We used Grammarly and ChatGPT for proofreading and language editing. These tools were employed solely to improve grammar, clarity, and readability.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

References

Begall, K., Grunow, D., & Buchler, S. (2023). Multidimensional gender ideologies across Europe: Evidence from 36 countries. *Gender and Society*, *37*(2), 177–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432231155914

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.

Craig, L., Powell, A., & Smyth, C. (2014). Towards intensive parenting? Changes in the composition and determinants of mothers' and fathers' time with children 1992–2006. *British Journal of Sociology*, *65*(3), 555–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12035

Dermott, E. (2017). The "intimate father': Defining paternal involvement. *Sociological Research*, *8*(4), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.859

Dobrotić, I., & Stropnik, N. (2020). Gender equality and parenting-related leaves in 21 former socialist countries. *Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *40*(5/6), 495–514.

Dotti Sani, G. M., & Treas, J. (2016). Educational gradients in parents' child-care time across countries, 1965–2012. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *78*(4), 1083–1096. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12305

Ennis, L. R. (2014). Intensive mothering: Revisiting the issue today. In L. R. Ennis (Ed.), *Intensive mothering: The cultural contradictions of modern motherhood* (pp. 1–24). Demeter Press.

Faircloth, C. (2014). Intensive parenting and the expansion of parenting. In E. Lee, J. Bristow, C. Faircloth, & J. Macvarish (Eds.), *Parenting culture studies* (pp. 25–50). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137304612_2

Gauthier, A. H., Bryson, C., Fadel, L., Haux, T., & Mynarska, M. (2021). Exploring the concept of intensive parenting in a three-country study. *Demographic Research*, *44*, Article 13. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2021.44.13

Hamplová, D., & Klusáček, J. (2025). *Family and health (ISSP 2021–22)—The Czech Republic* [Data set]. https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/OLHS8X

Hašková, H., & Dudová, R. (2017). Institutions and discourses on childcare for children under the age of three in a comparative French-Czech perspective. *Sociological Research Online*, *22*(3), 120–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780417725940

Hašková, H., & Dudová, R. (2025). Intensive mothering—Different repertoires, same goal. *Journal of Family Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2025.2487004

Hašková, H., & Saxonberg, S. (2016). The revenge of history—The institutional roots of post-communist family policy in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. *Social Policy and Administration*, *50*(5), 559–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12129

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Ishizuka, P. (2019). Social class, gender, and contemporary parenting standards in the United States: Evidence from a national survey experiment. *Social Forces*, *98*(1), 31–58. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy107

ISSP Research Group. (2025). *International social survey programme: Family and changing gender roles V—ISSP 2022* (ZA10000 Data file, Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. https://doi.org/10.4232/5.ZA10000.1.0.0.o

Jarkovská, L., Kampichler, M., & Slezáková, K. (2020). *Diverzifikace předškolního vzdělávání v ČR*. Masarykova univerzita.

Klímová Chaloupková, J. (2025a). Parents under pressure? Involvement in childcare and the perception of time pressure among Czech mothers and fathers. *Sociologický Časopis/Czech Sociological Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2025.008

Klímová Chaloupková, J. (2025b). Shared intensive parenting or intensive mothering? The link between gender beliefs and parenting attitudes in the Czech Republic. *Journal of Family Issues*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X251356253

Klímová Chaloupková, J., & Pospíšilová, K. (2024). Research note: Gender and educational differences in childcare time. Evidence from the Czech Republic. *Journal of Family Research*, *36*, 126–137. https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-1020

Kogan, I., Gebel, M., & Noelke, C. (2012). Educational systems and inequalities in educational attainment in Central and Eastern European countries. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, *4*(1), 69–83.

Kuchařová, V., Barvíková, J., Höhne, S., Nešporová, O., Paloncyová, J., & Vidovićová, L. (2020). *Zpráva o rodině 2020*. Výzkumný ústav práce a sociálních věcí.

Kutrovátz, K., & Nikolett, G. (2022). Quality time as focused time? The role of focused parental time on the wellbeing of adolescents. *Journal of Family Issues*, *44*(11), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X221113857

Lamb, M. E. (2000). The history of research on father involvement. *Marriage & Family Review*, *29*(2/3), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n02_03

Lamprianidou, E. A., Nunes, C. E., Antonietti, J. P., & Van Petegem, S. (2025). Intensive parenting among mothers and fathers: Identifying profiles and examining differences in parental involvement. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 39(5), 675–686. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001283

Lankes, J. (2022). Negotiating "impossible" ideals: Latent classes of intensive mothering in the United States. *Gender and Society*, *36*(5), 677–703. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432221114873

Liss, M., Schiffrin, H. H., Mackintosh, V. H., Miles-McLean, H., & Erchull, M. J. (2013). Development and validation of a quantitative measure of intensive parenting attitudes. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *22*(5), 621–636. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9616-y

Lojdová, K., & Manea, B. C. (2025). Vím, že jsou tam inteligentní lidi. Volba soukromé školy rodiči jako investice do sociálního kapitálu. *Sociologický Časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, *61*(4), 375–399. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.017

Lomazzi, V. (2022). Gender equality values and cultural orientations. In R. Luijkx, T. Reeskens, & I. Sieben (Eds.), *Reflections on European values: Honouring loek halman's contribution to the European values study*. Open Press Tilburg University.

Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond national. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*(4), 1173–1191. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566730

McGill, B. S. (2014). Navigating new norms of involved fatherhood: Employment, fathering attitudes, and father involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, *35*(8), 1089–1106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14522247

Minnotte, K. L. (2023). Decentering intensive mothering: More fully accounting for race and class in motherhood norms. *Sociology Compass*, *17*(8), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13095

Mollborn, S., & Billingsley, S. (2024). *Intensive parenting attitudes in Sweden: An exception or a global pattern?* (Research Report No. 3). Stockholm University.

Nešporová, O. (2019a). Hazy transition to fatherhood: The experiences of Czech fathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(2), 143–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18806028

Nešporová, O. (2019b). Obavy a těžkosti rané fáze rodičovství: Zjištění longitudinálního výzkumu prvorodičů. *Sociogický Časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, *55*(1), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.13060/00380288.2019.55.1.446

OECD. (2025). *OECD family database*. https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-family-database.html

Romagnoli, A., & Wall, G. (2012). "I know I'm a good mom": Young, low-income mothers' experiences with risk perception, intensive parenting ideology and parenting education programmes. *Health, Risk & Society*, *14*(3), 273–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698575.2012.662634

Saxonberg, S., & Sirovátka, T. (2006). Failing family policy in post-communist Central Europe. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, *8*(2), 185–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/13876980600682089

Shirani, F., Henwood, K., & Coltart, C. (2012). Meeting the challenges of intensive parenting culture: Gender, risk management and the moral parent. *Sociology*, *46*(1), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511416169

Straková, J., Greger, D., & Soukup, P. (2017). Factors affecting the transition of fifth graders to the academic track in the Czech Republic. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *26*(3), 288–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2017.1290541

Szelewa, D., & Polakowski, M. (2020). The "ugly" face of social investment? The politics of childcare in Central and Eastern Europe. *Social Policy & Administration*, *54*(1), 14–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12497

Szelewa, D., & Polakowski, M. (2023). *Who cares, too? Degenderization of childcare policies in Europe: A dynamic fuzzy-set analysis*. *Feminist Economics*, *29*(3), 153–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2023.2230239

Volejníčková Marková, R. (2024). From strictness to maternal intuition? Parenting styles in Czechia from a historical perspective. *Polish Sociological Review*, *3*, 291–306. https://doi.org/10.26412/psr227.05

About the Authors



Jana Klímová Chaloupková is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. Her work focuses on family sociology, parenting, and family norms and behaviour.



Hana Hašková is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. She specialises in gender, family, and social policy research with a focus on social inequalities and care regimes.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10887
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10887

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

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

Magda Muter

Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Correspondence: Magda Muter (m.i.muter@lse.ac.uk)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 16 February 2026 **Published:** 24 March 2026

Issue: This article 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 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

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

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.

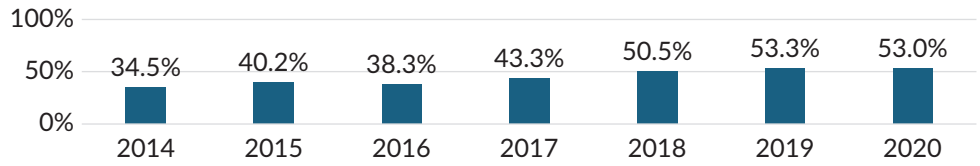


Figure 1. Men using paternity leave (as per the percentage of children born), 2014–2020. Source: Based on data from ZUS (2021).

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.

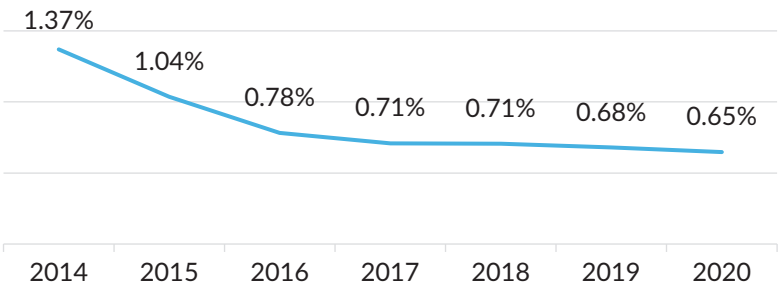


Figure 2. Men taking parental leave (as per the percentage of children born), 2014–2020. Source: Based on data from ZUS (2021).

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.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Ania Plomien, and my advisor, Diane Perrons, for their support during my PhD project. I also appreciate the support of Zuzana Dančíková, who accompanied me on the way, and Florence Waller-Carr, who helped when needed. Finally, I would also like to thank the editors of this thematic issue, Hana Hašková, Alenka Švab, Ivett Szalma, and Judit Takács, as well as the reviewers of this article.

Funding

My PhD project, including fieldwork which resulted in the dataset used in this article, was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council PhD studentship (project reference: ES/P000622/1) and by the LSE Final Year Fund.

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).

References

Aidukaite, J., & Telisauskaite-Cekanavice, D. (2020). The father's role in child care: Parental leave policies in Lithuania and Sweden. *Social Inclusion*, *8*(4), 81–91. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i4.2962

Altintas, E., & Sullivan, O. (2016). Fifty years of change updated: Cross-national gender convergence in housework. *Demographic Research*, *35*(16), 455–470. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.16

Altintas, E., & Sullivan, O. (2017). Trends in fathers' contribution to housework and childcare under different welfare policy regimes. *Social Politics*, *24*(1), 81–108. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxw007

Atkinson, J. (2022). Involved fatherhood and the workplace context: A new theoretical approach. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *29*(3), 845–862. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12789

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Ciaputa, E., Kowalska, B., Krzaklewska, E., Ratecka, A., Slany, K., Tobiasz-Adamczyk, B., Warat, M., & Woźniak, B. (2016). *Równość płci i jakość życia: Raport z badań sondażowych*. Uniwersytet Jagielloński.

Dančíková, Z. (2025). Undoing or unstructuring gender: The effects of the Slovak leave policy for fathers on the change of the gender structure. *Journal of Family Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2025.2540390

Dančíková, Z., & Muter, M. (2026). Subtle discrimination of fathers in relation to leave-taking: A comparative study of Slovakia and Poland. *Frontiers in Sociology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1709287

Dechant, A., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (2015). Changes in the division of labor within highly educated German couples when the first child is born. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung*, *27*(3), 374–394. https://doi.org/10.3224/zff.v27i3.21279

Eerola, P., Närvi, J., Terävä, J., & Repo, K. (2021). Negotiating parenting practices: The arguments and justifications of Finnish couples. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *10*(1), 119–135. https://doi.org/0.1332/204674320X15898834533942

EIGE. (2020). *Gender inequalities in care and pay in the EU*. https://doi.org/10.2839/809574

Ennis, L. R. (2014). Intensive mothering: Revisiting the issue today. In L. R. Ennis (Ed.), *Intensive mothering: The cultural contradictions of modern motherhood* (pp. 1–24). Demeter Press.

European Commission. (2017). *Gender equality 2017* (Special Eurobarometer 465). https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/431877

Eurostat. (2019). *Formal child care by duration and age group* [Dataset code: tps00185]. https://doi.org/10.2908/TPS00185

Forste, R., & Fox, K. (2012). Household labor, gender roles, and family satisfaction: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *43*(5), 613–631. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.43.5.613

Gomez Espino, J. M. (2013). Two sides of intensive parenting: Present and future dimensions in contemporary relations between parents and children in Spain. *Childhood*, *20*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212445225

Gregory, A., & Milner, S. (2011). Fathers and work-life balance in France and the UK: Policy and practice. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *31*(1/2), 34–52. https://doi.org/10.1108/01443331111104797

GUS. (2024). *Time use survey 2023*. https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5486/35/1/1/dobowy-budzet_czasu_ludnosci_w_2023_r.-informacja_sygnalna_korekta_danych.pdf

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Hobson, B., & Fahlen, S. (2009). Competing scenarios for European fathers: Applying Sen's capabilities and agency framework to work–family balance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *624*, 214–233. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334435

Kan, M. Y., Sullivan, O., & Gershuny, J. (2011). Gender convergence in domestic work: Discerning the effects of interactional and institutional barriers from large-scale data. *Sociology*, *45*(2), 234–251. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510394014

Kilkey, M., Perrons, D., & Plomien, A. (2013). *Gender, migration and domestic work: Mas-culinities, male labour and fathering in the UK and USA*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137303936

Kurowska, A. (2019). Poland: Leave policy and the process and goals of a major reform. In A.-Z. Duvander, P. Moss, & A. Koslowski (Eds.), *Parental leave and beyond* (1st ed., pp. 39–56). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447338796.ch003

Lamb, M. E. (1987). *The father's role: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Psychology Press, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Matysiak, A., & Steinmetz, S. (2008). Finding their way? Female employment patterns in West Germany, East Germany, and Poland. *European Sociological Review*, *24*(3), 331–345. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcn007

Mikucka, M. (2009). Division of household labor between spouses: How do Central and Eastern Europe differ from the West? *International Journal of Sociology*, *39*(1), 76–94. https://doi.org/10.2753/IJS0020-7659390105

Miller, T. (2011). Falling back into gender? Men's narratives and practices around first-time fatherhood. *Sociology*, *45*(6), 1094–1109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511419180

NIK. (2019). *Zapewnienie przez gminy opieki przedszkolnej* (LKI.410.017.2018 No. 28/2018/P/18/074/LKI). https://www.nik.gov.pl/kontrole/wyniki-kontroli-nik/pobierz,lki~p_18_074_20190125120210154841773 0~01,typ,kk.pdf

O'Brien, M., & Wall, K. (2017). Fathers on leave alone: Setting the scene. In M. O'Brien, & K. Wall (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on work-life balance and gender equality: Fathers on leave alone* (pp. 1–10). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0_1

Ostrouch-Kamińska, J. (2011). Rodzina z równoległymi karierami zawodowymi rodziców (dual-career family) jako przykład rodziny partnerskiej. *Forum Oświatowe*, *2*(45), 77–92.

Plomien, A. (2019). Gender inequality by design: Does successful implementation of childcare policy deliver gender-just outcomes? *Policy and Society*, *38*(4), 643–662. https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2019.1617513

Rebrey, S. M. (2023). Involved fatherhood in Russia. *Population and Economics*, *7*(3), 48–69. https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.7.e107546

Risman, B. J. (2017). 2016 southern sociological society presidential address: Are millennials cracking the gender structure? *Social Currents*, *4*(3), 208–227. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496517697145

Rose, J., Brady, M., Yerkes, M. A., & Coles, L. (2015). Sometimes they just want to cry for their mum': Couples' negotiations and rationalisations of gendered divisions in infant care. *Journal of Family Studies*, *21*(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2015.1010264

Ruckdeschel, K. (2024). Ready for parenthood? On intensive parenting ideals and fertility. *Journal of Family Issues*, *45*(12), 2985–3008. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X241227872

Sarnowska, J., & Pustułka, P. (2024). Parenting expertise during transitions-to-motherhood exploring transformations in knowledge regimes in Poland. *Sociological Research Online*, *30*(1), 260–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804241260532

Saxonberg, S. (2014). *Gendering family policies in post-communist Europe; a historical-institutional analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Serafin, K. (2016). Prawo do urlopu ojcowskiego w polskiej regulacji prawnej. *Zeszyty Prawnicze*, *10*(1), 221–232. https://doi.org/10.21697/zp.202010.10.1.12

Siemieńska, R. (2008). Gender, family, and work: The case of Poland in cross-national perspective. *International Journal of Sociology*, *38*(4),57–75. https://doi.org/10.2753/IJS0020-7659380403

Stevens, E. E., Patrick, T. E., & Pickler, R. (2009). A history of infant feeding. *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, *18*(2), 32–39. https://doi.org/10.1624/105812409X426314

Suwada, K. (2015). Being a traditional dad or being more like a mum? Clashing models of fatherhood according to Swedish and Polish fathers. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *46*(4), 467–481. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.46.4.467

Suwada, K. (2021). *Parenting and work in Poland: A gender studies perspective*. Springer. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-66303-2?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Švab, A., & Humer, Ž. (2026). Between supportive and involved fatherhood in Slovenia. *Social Inclusion*, *14*, Article 10859. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10859

Szelewa, D. (2019). Invention–institutionalization–implementation: The origins of childcare policies in Poland. *Social Politics*, *26*(1), 139–163. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy009

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. http://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

Wilińska, M., Grzenda, W., & Perek-Białas, J. (2019). Grandmothers and nongrandmothers in the Polish labor market: The role of family issues. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(12), 1677–1704. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19842243

Żadkowska, M. (2016). *Para w praniu. Codzienność, partnerstwo, obowiązki domowe*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego.

ZUS. (2021). *Uptake of paternity and parental leaves*. [Unpublished raw data].

About the Author

Magda Muter is a PhD candidate in the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her ESRC-funded project is titled “Formation and Change of Gendered Economic Inequality in Poland: The Transition to Parenthood and the Household Division of Labour.”

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10919
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10919

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Warm Fathers and Competent Mothers? Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Single Parents in Hungary

Boglárka Herke

Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

Correspondence: Boglárka Herke (herke.boglarka@tk.elte.hu)

Submitted: 7 July 2025 **Accepted:** 27 November 2025 **Published:** 15 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

Public attitudes and stereotypes significantly influence how mothers and fathers share parental responsibilities and who is considered the custodial parent after family separation. This study examines the differences between social perceptions of single mothers and fathers in post-socialist Hungary during the 2010s–2020s, a period marked by conservative governments reinforcing traditional gender roles. Using the stereotype content model and the concept of involved fatherhood as theoretical frameworks, the study presents three separate investigations from surveys conducted on representative and quota samples. The first examines general perceptions of single mothers (N = 416) and fathers (N = 407) through open-ended questions. The second assesses the perceived competence in solo parenting and its determinants using representative survey data (N = 1027). The third investigates perceptions of the difficulty of solo parenting for both mothers and fathers (N = 289) through free associations. Results show that besides the overall positive perceptions of both genders, single fathers were more frequently associated with warmth traits (e.g., likeable, friendly). Single mothers, however, were perceived as more competent, particularly regarding raising children alone. Qualitative data showed that while most respondents viewed single motherhood and fatherhood as equally difficult, gender stereotypes persisted—mothers were seen as more capable caregivers, fathers as better breadwinners. Quantitative results were more nuanced: More liberal views on parenting roles were linked to greater acceptance of both single mothers' and fathers' competence, but only to some extent. Emotional and relational aspects of parenting remain tied to the two-parent ideal, while financial concerns continue to influence perceptions of single mothers' adequacy as providers.

Keywords

gender roles; Hungary; involved fatherhood; single fathers; single mothers; stereotype content model

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

As single-parent families—defined as households where only one parent lives with the child(ren) and no partner is present—make up a significant share of families in advanced societies, many studies have examined their situation. However, examinations usually focus on related policies, the employment or socioeconomic status of the parents, and the well-being of the parents and children (e.g., Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). The perception of single parents is less often analyzed, although studies from the United States have drawn attention to the role of such perceptions in single parents' well-being (e.g., Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). Single parents might experience stigmatization simply because they are not living in a two-parent family formation. However, as the American scholarly literature highlights, perceptions of single parents also differ based on the gender of the parent (e.g., Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan et al., 1986; DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

These studies tend to conclude that single fathers have a more positive image in American society than single mothers, as they are perceived as heroes by taking on a non-traditional role and becoming the primary caregiver for their children. In contrast, perceptions of single mothers are not as positive, as single mothers are often seen as responsible for the dissolution of the two-parent family, which is referred to as "mother-blaming" in the literature (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Leslie & Clossick, 1992; Leslie & Southard, 2009). In one aspect, however, single mothers are usually perceived more positively than single fathers: They are judged to be better caregivers of children (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). These findings reveal a double standard regarding the perception of single parents, although this standard has two aspects: Perceptions of single fathers are generally more positive, but single mothers are perceived as more competent in parenting.

Such perceptions follow the traditional view of mothers as carers and fathers as breadwinners, leaving no room for mothers to be seen as economically independent from men or for fathers to be seen as caring and involved parents. As previous studies have highlighted, these perceptions can directly affect how mothers and fathers share parental responsibilities and who is considered the custodial parent after family separation. Viewing fathers solely as breadwinners can lead to automatically favouring mothers when deciding on child custody (Meyer & Garasky, 1993; Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Meanwhile, the perception of mothers as primarily caregivers, along with related policies and disadvantages in the labour market, may contribute to women remaining in unsatisfying or harmful relationships in order to maintain economic stability (Orloff, 1993).

This article aims to examine public perceptions of single parents in a context outside the United States—specifically, post-socialist Hungary in the 2010s and 2020s. Beyond its post-socialist character, Hungary offers a particularly relevant case because this period was marked by conservative governments that reinforced traditional gender roles. Since the formation of the second Orbán government in 2010, policies have promoted "traditional families," defined as heterosexual married couples with children, and have aimed to reinforce the traditional gender division of labour by emphasizing women's roles as mothers while placing less focus on men's roles as fathers (Fodor, 2022; Pető & Juhász, 2024). At the same time, however, census data show an increase in the proportion of single fathers between 2011 and 2022, and legislation on joint custody has become more lenient. This mixed context provides a fruitful setting to investigate stereotypes about single mothers and fathers.

For a theoretical framework, this article uses the stereotype content model (SCM; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002): Such a distinction reflects the concept of warmth and competence stereotypes, according to which groups' perceptions are often mixed. While high-status groups are perceived as being competent, cooperative groups are seen as being warm. For single parents, previous results show that single mothers are seen as competent but less warm, while single fathers are seen as warm but less competent. This theoretical framework provides a promising way to evaluate differences in perceptions.

This article also draws on the theoretical foundations of "new" and "involved" fatherhood. While previous literature on perceptions of single parents has often approached the issue through a dichotomous lens—suggesting that consistent gender stereotypes shape public attitudes—the concept of involved fatherhood offers a more dynamic perspective. It emphasizes the evolving and shared nature of parental responsibilities, allowing for a more flexible understanding of caregiving and breadwinning roles beyond traditional gender norms.

Based on the literature and theoretical considerations presented above, the article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How are single mothers and fathers perceived in Hungary, and how do these perceptions relate to the dimensions of warmth and competence? Does the same double standard exist in the perceptions of single parents in Hungary as in the US?
2. How do attitudes on traditional gender roles, traditional family formation, and involved fatherhood explain these perceptions?

The article is structured as follows. It first reviews the literature on perceptions of single mothers and fathers, then outlines the theoretical framework of the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood. The empirical section includes three studies: Study 1 analyses stereotypes from open-ended responses using SCM; study 2 examines perceived competence of single mothers and fathers in raising children; and study 3 explores perceived difficulties of single parenthood in order to better understand competence differences. The conclusion interprets the findings through the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood and offers policy recommendations to address the double standard.

2. Literature Review on Stereotypes About Single Parents

Single parents often face stereotypes, regardless of their gender. The highlighted source of stereotyping in the literature is that people tend to compare other family forms to the heteronormative standard, which perceives families as healthy only when both a mother and a father are present (Haire & McGeorge, 2012; Oswald et al., 2005). Therefore, families are perceived differently according to how far they correspond to the heteronormative ideal, and attitudes are usually the most negative towards never-married single parents (Bryan et al., 1986). However, previous studies focusing especially on never-married single parents have also identified gender differences in the perceptions.

2.1. Single Mothers Are Perceived More Negatively

The perception of single mothers is more often investigated than that of single fathers. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of American scholarly literature on the negative perception of single mothers receiving welfare benefits (e.g., Foster, 2008; Gilman, 2014; Hancock, 2004). The American stereotype of the "welfare queen"—a Black, lazy single mother from the underclass who has children only to avoid work—was extremely salient in US welfare debates during the 1990s (Hancock, 2004). In addition, existing literature about the general perception of single mothers shows that they are perceived more negatively than other mothers: They are imagined as deviant, unhappy, less competent (Ganong et al., 1988; Ganong & Coleman, 1995), promiscuous, and disrespectful towards the ideal of the traditional family (Ganong et al., 1988).

As single motherhood has been associated with a series of negative stereotypes in the US, it is not surprising that studies conducted in the country have found that single mothers are less positively perceived than single fathers (DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). DeJean et al. (2012) used three different types of attitude questionnaires and surveyed 1350 respondents to explore beliefs about single mothers and fathers. Respondents rated single fathers as more responsible, moral, economically advantaged, secure, and good parents. Furthermore, financial hardship, which was more likely to affect single mothers, was also associated with worse parenting skills, suggesting that single mothers are perceived as less competent parents due to their greater economic disadvantage.

Haire and McGeorge (2012) identified similar patterns through a feminist thematic analysis of undergraduate students' responses regarding single parents. They found that negative stereotypes of single mothers were primarily linked to personal characteristics—such as being neglectful, irresponsible, insecure, or promiscuous—whereas negative views of single fathers were associated with situational challenges, including difficulties with childcare and forming new partnerships. In line with earlier studies (Leslie & Clossick, 1992; Leslie & Southard, 2009), their findings suggest that American society holds single mothers more personally responsible for family breakdowns, blaming them for not waiting to enter a relationship or for being unable to maintain one. Meanwhile, single fathers are often praised for taking on caregiving roles. As a result, single mothers are expected to overcompensate by becoming "super-mothers" in order to counter the more sympathetic, even heroic, image of single fathers (Anderson & Anderson, 2005; Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

2.2. Single Fathers Are Perceived as Having Poorer Parenting Skills

The research evidence presented above has shown that single fathers have a more positive image in general, although there is one aspect in which perceptions of single mothers are more favourable, namely parenting skills (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). For instance, Bennett and Jamieson's (1999) study investigated the perception of four different groups of mothers and fathers and found that fathers, in general, were seen as having poorer parenting skills and family relations and as being less caring than mothers. Haire and McGeorge's (2012) feminist thematic analysis found that single mothers are perceived as better able to meet their children's special needs than single fathers. Fathers were seen as less competent in everyday tasks like cooking or choosing clothes, and they were perceived as unable to handle "girl activities," such as menstruation or puberty. In contrast, no similar concerns were raised about single mothers managing boys' puberty. However, mothers were still seen as unable to fully take on paternal roles—being

described as too protective and lacking certain, often unspecified, "father skills," unlike the clearly defined "mother skills." The authors argue that the inability to specify fathers' skills in parenting limits fathers' role to breadwinning and disciplining, leaving no space for caring responsibilities. Respondents also explained that while mothers are inherently competent in parenting, fathers have to learn these skills. The stereotype that fathers cannot be sensitive enough with their daughters was also salient.

In contrast to the findings presented above, DeJean et al. (2012) found that single fathers were perceived as better parents by undergraduate students. However, most prior research indicates that single fathers are perceived as less competent in caregiving than single mothers.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Warmth and Competence

The research findings presented above could be understood through the lens of the SCM (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002), according to which there are two general groups of social stereotypes: warmth and competence. Groups are perceived as competent if they are seen as able to be successful in self-interested tasks. On the other hand, groups are perceived as warm if they are oriented to help others more than themselves. The positions of groups in these dimensions are dependent on their perceived status and cooperativeness. While groups with a high level of status are seen as competent, groups that display cooperative behavior are perceived as warm. The perception of groups, however, is often mixed across these two dimensions.

For instance, due to traditional images, women, in general, are seen as warm but not competent (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Eagly et al., 1994). First, women are seen as less competent because they, traditionally, have a lower status than men. Second, women are seen as cooperative (warm) and not competitive because men are intimately interdependent with them in close relationships (e.g., as mothers or wives; see Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Different subgroups of women, however, score differently on these two dimensions (Eckes, 2002; Fiske, 2010). Women in non-traditional roles, such as career women and feminists, are often seen as competent but not warm (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Similarly, mothers working in occupations traditionally associated with the male sex are seen as worse parents than non-working mothers by gaining competence but losing warmth (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

The differing perceptions of single mothers and fathers offer a new gendered perspective on the model: single mothers are viewed as more competent but less warm than single fathers. This may be because, in the context of single parenthood, competence is linked to family tasks rather than work outside the home. As a result, traditional gender roles are inverted—mothers are seen as more competent caregivers, while fathers, stepping outside their expected roles, are viewed as warmer and more cooperative. In contrast, single mothers may be seen as less cooperative for not maintaining the family unit, a role traditionally assigned to women.

3.2. Involved Fatherhood

The SCM provides a valuable theoretical foundation for examining gender differences in perceptions of single parents—particularly in relation to traditional gender roles; however, it is also useful to introduce an additional framework to account for shifting norms in parenting, and especially in fatherhood.

While the traditional gendered division of labour positioned men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, these roles have shifted considerably in recent decades, leading to a growing overlap between them. Since the latter half of the 20th century, women's participation in paid work has become increasingly common, while more recent discussions have highlighted evolving models of "new" fatherhood—framing fathers not only as providers, but also as active, caring, and emotionally involved parents (Dermott, 2008; Gerson, 2010; Townsend, 2002).

The norms of involved fatherhood require men to be present both at home and in the workplace, often creating tensions in balancing work and family life. Fathers may struggle to reconcile the nurturing role with the traditional expectation of being the primary provider (Takács, 2020). Although societal norms still pressure fathers to prioritize economic provision—typically involving longer working hours and less time at home—empirical findings remain inconclusive regarding whether fathers actually work longer hours than non-fathers (Dermott, 2008; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; Townsend, 2002).

Previous studies also highlight the importance of attitudes in shaping father involvement. Evidence shows a positive association between fathers' egalitarian gender attitudes—particularly those supportive of caring father roles—and their engagement with children (Bulanda, 2004; Hofferth, 2003). Fathers who hold more non-traditional views are also more likely to reduce their working hours and spend more time with their children (McGill, 2014).

Fathers' attitudes toward parenting can also play a crucial role in family separation, influencing both decisions about custodial arrangements and the likelihood of establishing joint physical custody. Fathers who are actively involved in parenting are more likely to pursue custody of their children. Meanwhile, not only fathers' attitudes but also society's stance on fathers' role in parenting is a decisive factor. Research shows that fathers are more likely to receive custody when decisions are made out of court by the parents themselves, whereas judges tend to favour mothers (Coles, 2009; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). Qualitative studies also highlight fathers' negative experiences with the child custody system, where they are often treated as secondary parents and must exert greater effort to prove their competence (Shorey & Pereira, 2023; Turchi, 2014).

Examining the social perceptions of single fathers thus provides a valuable test of how a society truly engages with the idea of involved fatherhood, as these fathers are potentially the most engaged in day-to-day parenting (Greif, 1995).

4. The Hungarian Context of Single Motherhood and Fatherhood

Since 2010, the Orbán government has developed a gender regime in which policies and accompanying discourses primarily emphasize women's roles as mothers, framing motherhood as the central means of achieving population growth. Within this so-called "carefare regime," care work is not commodified but instead reassigned to the private sphere—specifically to mothers—rather than being supported through public services (Fodor, 2022). At the same time, economic pressures compel women to engage in the labour market, resulting in a double burden of paid employment and unpaid care responsibilities, while promoting gender equality in the labour market is not among the government's objectives. Gender studies programs have been banned (Rohde & Takács, 2023), and both national curricula and government discourses reinforce traditional gender roles (Pető & Juhász, 2024). The government explicitly rejects the use of the term "gender," asserting that only biological sex is relevant (Fodor, 2022; Pető & Juhász, 2024).

Achieving population growth is also closely linked to the promotion of traditional gender roles and heteronormative family structures in the government's rhetoric. As a result, newly introduced family policy measures, such as the childbirth incentive loan (*babaváró hitel*) and families' housing subsidy plus (*CSOK Plusz*), are tied to heterosexual marriage (as well as to employment status and higher income), thereby excluding alternative family types, such as single-parent households, from being eligible. Moreover, since women are viewed as primarily responsible for caring and demographic growth, fathers are frequently marginalized in these policies. For instance, in 2019, the government introduced a tax benefit for young mothers under the age of 30, as well as a full income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children—an exemption that is planned to be extended to mothers with three and eventually two children starting in 2025. These policies completely disregard the caregiving contributions of fathers and exclude single fathers from access to such benefits.

The government's promotion of heteronormative nuclear families is also reflected in changes to the adoption system. Since 2020, single individuals are only permitted to adopt with ministerial approval and only if no suitable married couple can be found anywhere in the country. This restriction has led to a measurable decline in single-parent adoptions, disproportionately affecting single men ("2023-as örökbefogadási statisztika," 2024).

While post-2010 policies have generally limited fathers' roles in childcare, shared custody legislation marks an exception by expanding paternal rights. A 2014 legal change enabled joint physical custody by eliminating the requirement to designate one parent as the child's primary residence, thus preserving both parents' custody rights (Szalma & Rékai, 2019). In 2022, another reform allowed courts to grant shared custody at the request of just one parent, provided it serves the child's best interest. While the change in 2022 was welcomed by fathers' organizations, it has drawn feminist criticism, particularly over risks in cases involving domestic violence, where it may allow abusive parents to maintain access to children and former partners (Monostori, 2023).

These changes in child custody legislation may also have contributed to the rising proportion of single-father households among single-parent families with children under the age of 18. According to Hungarian census data, their share increased from 9% in 2011 to 16.8% in 2022 (HCSO, 2025). While Hungary previously aligned with the European Union average in terms of single-father representation, this increase brings the country closer to post-socialist contexts such as Romania and Estonia, where the share typically approaches 20% (Jordan et al., 2019). However, despite this rise, it remains an open question how single fathers are perceived publicly—especially within a policy and discursive environment which continues to frame caregiving as primarily a woman's responsibility.

4.1. Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Single Fathers and Mothers in Hungary

Previous research on perceptions of single mothers has shown that the stereotypes are less negative in Hungary than in the US. Single motherhood is more likely to be associated with situational stereotypes; for instance, the public believes that they are poor, overworked, and in a rather difficult situation (Herke, 2021). Based on these findings, we could suppose that single mothers are not perceived significantly more negatively than single fathers in Hungary. Other results, however, show that there are some differences in the general perception, at least based on re-partnering statistics. A Hungarian study (Murinkó & Szalma, 2016) showed that the re-partnering rate was highest among those men who lived with their children at

least part-time. Therefore, single-parent status appears to increase men's attractiveness, whereas single mothers often remain alone for quite a considerable period (Monostori, 2015).

Other findings underline the existence of a double standard in the perception of single mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. Statistics show that parents agreed that the mother should be the custodial parent in 90% of the cases. In contrast, fathers had a higher chance when the court decided on custody, being selected as custodial parents in 40% of these cases (Grád et al., 2008; Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Therefore, related legal studies have concluded that while gender stereotypes about parenting skills are not particularly strong among judges, parents still decide according to social expectations: Fathers might feel that they have no chance of winning custody, while mothers may feel the pressure to fight for their children, even if they believe that the father would be a better custodial parent (Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Although the presented statistics support the existence of a double standard in the perception of single parents' parenting skills, no previous Hungarian study has specifically investigated public opinion regarding this issue.

5. Data and Analysis

To investigate public perceptions of single mothers and fathers in the Hungarian context, the study draws on three different data sources and analytical approaches.

5.1. General Perceptions of Single Mothers and Fathers: Warmth and Competence

First, to explore the general perception of single mothers and fathers, an open-ended question was asked. To reduce social desirability bias, the question did not focus on the personal opinion of the respondent, but rather asked about society's views: "In your opinion, how does Hungarian society see single mothers/single fathers? Please provide three words." This question was part of a survey, with a sample of 1200 respondents, representative of the Hungarian population in terms of gender, age, education, and settlement type. The survey was administered face-to-face in December 2019 by a market research company, Szociográf. The sample was split, and one part of the respondents received the question about single mothers, while the other was asked about single fathers. Due to the high non-response rate and the type of question, it cannot be stated that the results are representative of the population, but the collected data capture stereotypes among a heterogeneous sample. For the version asking about single mothers, 416 respondents (69%) provided at least one association, while 407 respondents (68%) answered the question about single fathers. Female respondents represented 56% of those answering the single mother version and 48% in the single father version.

The results of the open-ended questions were coded in two steps. First, stereotypes were coded together when different words or expressions conveyed the same underlying idea. For example, "overworked" and "tired" were treated as a single category, both reflecting the perception of being overextended. Second, these categories were reviewed to determine whether they contained stereotypes connected to the warmth or competence dimensions. Stereotypes referring to single parents' social relations or interactions with others were coded as warmth-related, while those concerning their ability, performance, or goal achievement were coded as competence-related. For warmth, positive stereotypes reflected traits considered desirable in social interactions, whereas negative warmth stereotypes reflected socially undesirable traits. For competence, positive stereotypes indicated traits that facilitate goal achievement, while negative competence stereotypes reflected traits suggesting an inability to achieve goals.

Some words clearly reflected one of the SCM dimensions (e.g., "strong" as a competence stereotype, "friendly" as a warmth stereotype), whereas others could not be easily categorized. For these latter cases, categorization relied on the emotion the stereotype appeared to elicit, corresponding to the emotional dimensions of the SCM (admiration, pity, envy, or disgust; see Cuddy et al., 2008). Stereotypes reflecting *pity* formed a particularly notable category in the analysis. These included descriptors such as "lonely," "stressed," "poor," or "disadvantaged." Such stereotypes were coded as high in warmth but low in competence, reflecting the perception that these individuals are morally valued yet lack the ability or resources to achieve their goals. Stereotypes reflecting admiration—for instance, describing single parents as "responsible" (which relates both to positive social relations and to a positive outlook on achieving goals)—were coded as high in both warmth and competence. Stereotypes implying disgust or contempt, including descriptors such as "irresponsible," were coded as low in both warmth and competence. Envy-related stereotypes, such as portraying single parents as overly confident or privileged—low in warmth but high in competence—were not observed in the sample.

In cases where a stereotype could potentially fit into two categories, but its valence on one dimension (warmth or competence) was ambiguous, coding was based solely on the clearer dimension. For instance, "strong" was coded as high in competence—a clearly positive attribute—but was not classified on the warmth dimension, as it can carry both positive and negative connotations, and therefore could be seen as eliciting admiration but also as threatening and evoking envy.

5.2. Competence of Single Mothers and Fathers: Quantitative Data

Second, to examine the perceived competence of single fathers and mothers, the Hungarian database of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2022 was used, which was administered to a representative sample of 1027 respondents from the Hungarian population. The survey included the following statements: "A single mother can bring up her child as well as two parents together," and "A single father can bring up his child as well as two parents together." Respondents had to evaluate the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*. A *can't choose* option was also specified. Besides comparing the results of these two statements, the article also analyzes the determinants of these attitudes. For a temporal comparison, the article also presents results from the ISSP surveys conducted in 1988 and 2013 (TÁRKI Omnibusz, 1988, 2013), which included the same questions. However, the regression analysis focuses exclusively on the 2022 data to model the determinants of these attitudes in contemporary society.

Separate ordinal regression models were applied to analyze attitudes toward the perceived capabilities of single mothers and single fathers. For the analysis, the categories of the dependent variables were recoded, with 5 representing *strongly agree* and 1 representing *strongly disagree*. The same sets of independent variables were included in both models. Responses of *neither agree nor disagree* were treated as a middle category on the ordinal scale. The proportional odds assumption was tested in both models and was met in the final models.

The first set of independent variables assessed attitudes toward parenting roles to examine how beliefs about traditional gender roles and involved fatherhood influence the outcomes. Respondents were asked to consider a family with a mother and father raising a five-year-old child and indicate which parent should: (a) provide financially, (b) care for the child daily, (c) play with the child and take part in the child's leisure activities, and

(d) serve as a role model. Response options included: *the mother mostly*, *the mother somewhat more than the father*, *both parents equally*, *the father somewhat more than the mother*, *the father mostly*, *can't choose*, and *prefer not to answer*, with the latter two excluded from the analysis. For daily care and play, father-related answer categories were combined due to low response counts. The questionnaire also contained items on teaching behaviour and advising the child; however, these were excluded from the analysis as they were not significant predictors, simplifying the model and reducing overfitting.

As a second set of independent variables, attitudes towards non-traditional family forms were added; therefore, the models also control for views on marriage and same-sex couples. While the questionnaire included only gender-specific items regarding same-sex couples, the statement about the acceptance of a female couple was included in the model analyzing attitudes toward single mothers, while the statement about a male couple was included in the model analyzing attitudes toward single fathers.

Finally, the models controlled for alternative explanations, such as demographic variables: gender, age, marital status, settlement type, education, religiousness, presence of children in the household, subjective income status, minority status, and party preference.

5.3. Competence of Single Mothers and Fathers: Qualitative Data

Third, to better understand how competence is perceived for single parents, the article analyzes responses to a two-step question asking: Is raising a child alone more difficult for a mother or for a father? The answer options were: (a) more difficult for a mother, (b) more difficult for a father, and (c) equally difficult for both. Respondents then provided brief explanations. This two-step question was part of a survey administered in November 2017 by a market research company (NRC) using a quota sample of 1000 Hungarian internet users. Only half (510) received this question, and 289 offered explanations. Though not representative and conducted five years before the ISSP, the data offer valuable insights into perceptions of single mothers' and fathers' competence.

The responses were analyzed with thematic analysis, as the aim was to identify, analyze, and report patterns found in the data. The process included the steps advised by Braun and Clarke (2006): getting to know the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing the report.

6. Results

6.1. Stereotypes: Warmth and competence

In total, 21 stereotype categories were distinguished based on the answers to the open-ended questions ("In your opinion, how does Hungarian society see single mothers/single fathers? Please provide three words"), of which thirteen reflected on the competence dimension, four were connected to warmth, and thirteen contained stereotypes connected to both warmth and competence.

Before analyzing the stereotypes based on the warmth and competence theory, it is worth looking at the raw categories as they also contain relevant information about the perception of single parents (Table 1). In regard

to mothers, respondents most often associated them with being in a difficult situation (20.4%), being strong (19.2%), persistent or tough (17.3%), and busy or overdriven (13%). On the other hand, when respondents were asked about stereotypes of single fathers, the most frequent categories were being family-oriented or related traits (14.7%), being persistent or tough (12.8%), and being heroic (11.8%).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the differences in perceptions of single mothers and fathers based on warmth and competence. Regarding competence, single mothers were more often described as strong (19.2% vs. 8.6%) and persistent or tough (17.3% vs. 12.8%), but also as weak or vulnerable (7% vs. 3.2%). Furthermore, single fathers were more often described as brave (11.1% vs. 8.7%). The perceptions of warmth show clearer results. Positive stereotypes connected to warmth were mentioned more often in the case of single fathers: A larger share of respondents described them as heroic (11.8% vs. 5.5%), family-oriented (14.7% vs. 2.9%), responsible (4.2% vs. 2.4%), self-sacrificing (4.2% vs. 1.4%), and likeable (7.6% vs. 5.5%; respondents also used other positive character traits belonging to these categories to describe them). Single fathers, furthermore, were not described as irresponsible by any of the respondents, while 4.3% applied this characteristic to single mothers.

Table 1. Free associations about perceptions of single mothers and fathers.

Warmth or competence? Positive or negative?	Categories	Single mothers		Single fathers	
		N	% (of all respondents)	*N*	% (of all respondents)
W (+) (C–)	in a difficult situation, disadvantaged	85	20.4	38	9.3
C (+)	strong	80	19.2	35	8.6
C (+)	persistent, tough	72	17.3	52	12.8
W (+) C (–)	busy, tired, overdriven, working a lot	54	13.0	8	2.0
W (+) C (–)	society looks down and blames them	50	12.0	14	3.4
W (+) C (–)	needs more state help	45	10.8	17	4.2
W (+) C (–)	lonely, depressed, stressed	41	9.9	21	5.2
W (+) C (–)	poor, financially disadvantaged	38	9.1	7	1.7
C (+)	brave	36	8.7	45	11.1
C (–)	weak, vulnerable	29	7.0	13	3.2
C (+)	ambitious, determined	27	6.5	24	5.9
W (+) C (+)	heroic, honorable, admirable	23	5.5	48	11.8
W (+)	likeable, sincere, friendly, other (+)	23	5.5	31	7.6
C (+)	confident, decisive	22	5.3	26	6.4
C (+)	diligent, hard-working	20	4.8	14	3.4
C (+)	skilled, capable	19	4.6	12	2.9
W (–) C (–)	irresponsible	18	4.3	—	—
C (+)	independent	17	4.1	18	4.4
W (–)	ridiculous, lame, other (–)	14	3.4	13	3.2
W (+) C (–)	society helps them	13	3.1	12	2.9
W (+) C (–)	to be pitied	13	3.1	12	2.9
W (+)	family-friendly, self-giving, caring, affectionate	12	2.9	60	14.7

Table 1. (Cont.) Free associations about perceptions of single mothers and fathers.

Warmth or competence? Positive or negative?	Categories	Single mothers		Single fathers	
		N	% (of all respondents)	*N*	% (of all respondents)
W (+) C (+)	responsible, reliable	10	2.4	17	4.2
W (+) C (–)	unlucky	8	1.9	7	1.7
W (+)	self-sacrificing, adaptive	6	1.4	17	4.2
C (+)	usual situation	4	1.0	–	–
W (+) (C–)	their partner left them	1	0.2	9	2.2
C (–)	lacking parenting skills	1	0.2	4	1.0
C (+)	good parenting skills	1	0.2	6	1.5
(C–)	unusual situation	–	0.0	22	5.4
	other	32	7.7	19	4.7
Total number of respondents		416		407	

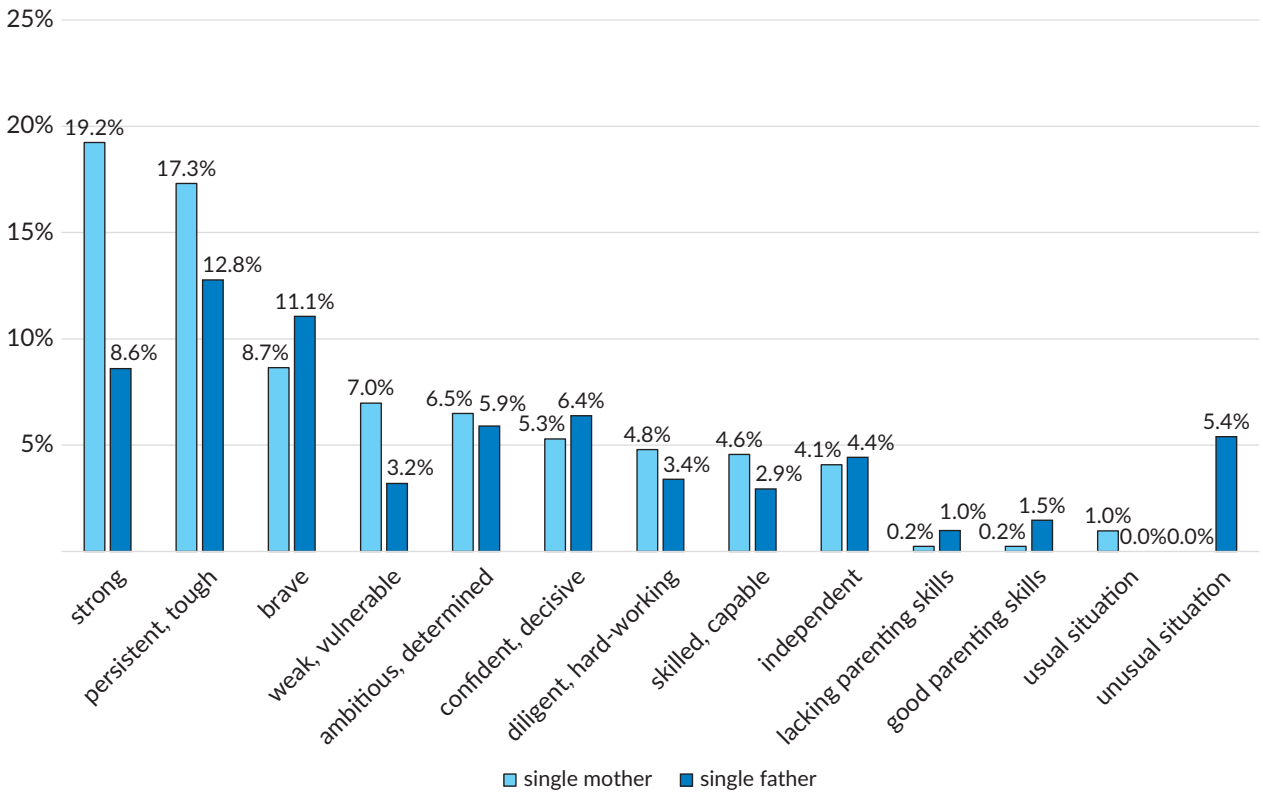


Figure 1. Stereotypes connected to competence (single mothers and single fathers).

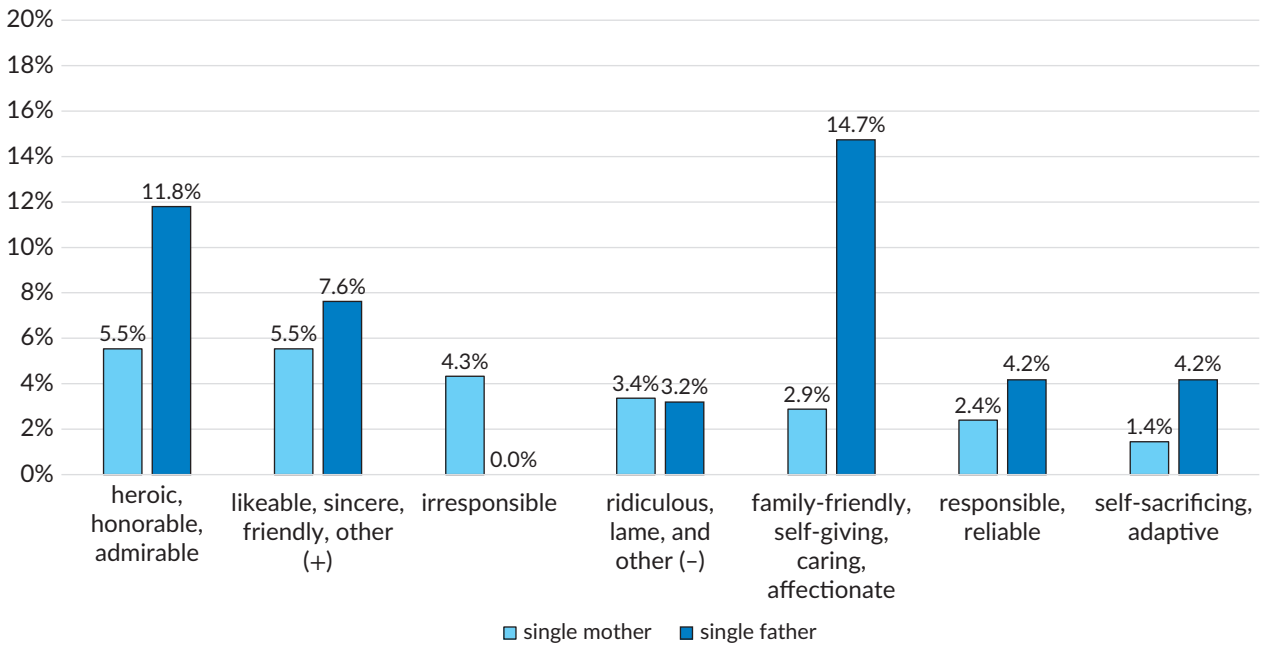


Figure 2. Stereotypes connected to warmth (single mothers and single fathers).

If we investigate the share of those respondents who mentioned positive and negative stereotypes connected to warmth and competence (Table 2), the differences are even more noticeable. A higher share of respondents associated positive stereotypes connected to warmth with single fathers (35.6%), than with single mothers (16.3%), and a lower share of them mentioned negative stereotypes connected to warmth about single fathers (3.2% vs. 7,5%). Regarding competence, there is no large difference; however, respondents slightly more often mentioned positive traits connected to single fathers (44.2%) than to single mothers (42.3%). Negative competence traits, however, were (slightly) more often associated with single fathers (9.6%) than with single mothers (7.2%). Regardless of warmth and competence, 63.9% wrote positive stereotypes in the case of single fathers, and 49.3% in the case of single mothers. The share of negative associations was also higher for mothers (14.2% vs. 12.8%). Even more salient was that the proportion of

Table 2. The share of warmth, competence, and positive, negative, and situational stereotypes.

Warmth or competence? (Positive/negative)	Single mother		Single father	
	N	% (of all respondents)	*N*	% (of all respondents)
W(+)	68	16.3	145	35.6
W(–)	31	7.5	13	3.2
C(+)	176	42.3	180	44.2
C(–)	30	7.2	39	9.6
(+)	205	49.3	260	63.9
(–)	59	14.2	52	12.8
W(+) C(–)	256	61.5	118	29
W(+) C(+)	33	7.9	65	15.9
W(–) C(–)	18	4.3	–	–
Total	416	100	407	100

stereotypes evoking pity—reflecting high warmth but low competence—was substantially higher for mothers than for fathers (62.5% vs. 34.4%).

6.2. Single Mothers' and Fathers' Ability To Raise Children Alone: Focusing on Competence

The data show that an increasing share of people agree that single mothers and single fathers are capable of raising a child as effectively as two parents in Hungary (Table 3). For single mothers, the proportion agreeing or strongly agreeing rose from 25% in 1988 to 29% in 2013, and to 41.8% in 2024. For single fathers, support increased from 13.1% in 1988 to 17.6% in 2013, and to 30.4% in 2024. However, the gap in agreement between single mothers and single fathers remained at approximately 10%.

Table 3. Share of responses to the statement: "A single mother/father can raise her/his child as well as two parents together" (1988, 2013, 2024).

	Single mother			Single father		
Survey year	1988	2013	2024	1988	2013	2024
strongly agree	4,4	7,0	18,1	1,9	3,1	15,1
agree	20,6	22,1	23,7	11,2	14,5	15,3
neither agree nor disagree	16,1	33,1	29,0	17,4	33,3	27,6
disagree	48,0	24,6	23,0	52,6	30,8	27,1
strongly disagree	10,0	10,8	5,9	15,9	15,9	14,5
do not know	0,8	2,1	0,2	0,8	2,3	0,4

Source: Hungarian database of ISSP 1988 (N = 1737), 2012 (N = 1012), 2022 (N = 1027).

Analysis of the 2024 data using regression models reveals significant findings regarding perceptions of specific parental roles. Views on who should be the main financial provider in a family influence attitudes toward the perceived capabilities of single mothers and fathers—but in different ways. Individuals who see mothers as primarily responsible for providing financially are less likely to support single motherhood than those who believe this role should fall to fathers. In contrast, individuals who believe that both parents should share financial responsibility are more supportive of single fatherhood than those who view breadwinning as solely the father's role.

Thus, while less traditional views about breadwinning are associated with greater support for single fatherhood, they are linked to reduced support for single motherhood—highlighting how shifts in gender role expectations can have asymmetric implications for mothers and fathers. The negative relationship in the case of single mothers may reflect the perception that women occupy a more vulnerable position in the labour market. Consequently, those who believe that mothers should serve as the primary breadwinners may also recognize that, when raising a child alone, balancing financial provision and caregiving becomes particularly difficult given their vulnerable position in the labour market.

The results also show a mixed picture regarding who should do the day-to-day care of children. These attitudes influence only the single mother model, showing that those believing in the equal participation of the two sexes or that fathers should do this more likely to support single mothers' ability, suggesting that less traditional views on caring for children are associated with greater support. However, for the last two variables related to specific parenting roles, the results contradict this finding. Individuals who believe that playing with children

and serving as a role model should be the responsibility of both parents—or of fathers rather than mothers—are less likely to support either single motherhood or single fatherhood.

These findings suggest that less traditional views on parenting roles do not straightforwardly translate into higher perceived capability for single mothers or fathers. In this sense, an attitude towards the more equal distribution of parenting roles may actually reinforce the perceived need for both parents to be present in the family. While core tasks such as breadwinning or day-to-day caregiving may be seen as manageable by a single parent (especially in cases where the labour market and financial supports make it possible), respondents seem to believe that a child would still be missing out on a role model or a play companion. Thus, even when individual roles are seen as transferable, the emotional and relational aspects of parenting remain tied to a two-parent ideal.

Controlling for traditional family attitudes, beliefs about the importance of marriage were significant at the 10% level and only in the single father model. Those who believed people should marry before having children were less supportive of single fatherhood. In contrast, agreement that same-sex couples can raise children as well as two parents significantly increased support for both single motherhood and fatherhood. This variable explained the most variation, raising pseudo R^2 from 6.6% to 14.4% in the single mother model, and from 6% to 16.7% in the single father model.

The results indicate that different demographic factors are associated with support for single mothers and single fathers. Women are more likely than men to believe that single mothers can raise children as well as two parents. In the case of single mothers, religiosity also matters, with individuals who never attend church showing greater support than those who attend weekly. Additionally, respondents who self-identify as Roma are less likely to support single motherhood.

For single fathers, marital status is a significant factor, as single respondents express greater support compared to those in a relationship but not married. Age also plays a role, with older individuals being less supportive of single fatherhood. Furthermore, those living in villages are less likely to support single fathers than those residing in large cities.

Two demographic factors predict support for both single mothers and single fathers in a similar way. Individuals in a better financial situation are more likely to express supportive attitudes toward both groups. Likewise, supporters of parties other than the governing party coalition FIDESZ-KDNP tend to be more supportive, although in the case of single motherhood this effect is only significant at the 10% level.

Table 4. Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Provide for the family financially (ref. father)						
Mother	−0.62	0.01	−1.09, −0.16	0.23	0.37	−0.27, 0.74
Equally	−0.01	0.96	−0.36, 0.35	0.80	0.00	0.38, 1.22
Take care of the child on a daily basis (ref. mother)						
Equally or the father	0.41	0.04	0.03, 0.79	−0.30	0.13	−0.69, 0.09

Table 4. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Play with the child and take part in their leisure activities (ref. mother)						
Equally or the father	−0.78	0.00	−1.19, −0.37	−0.37	0.08	−0.79, 0.04
Serve as a role model for the child (ref. mother)						
Equally	−1.15	0.00	−1.74, −0.56	−1.11	0.00	−1.83, −0.39
Father	−1.65	0.00	−2.49, −0.82	−1.29	0.01	−2.30, −0.28
People who want children ought to get married (ref. disagree)						
Neither agree nor disagree	−0.29	0.10	−0.63, 0.05	−0.34	0.05	−0.68, 0.00
Agree	0.03	0.88	−0.34, 0.40	−0.35	0.06	−0.73, 0.02
A female/male couple can raise a child (ref. disagree)						
Neither agree nor disagree	1.07	0.00	0.70, 1.44	1.52	0.00	1.15, 1.89
Agree	2.41	0.00	1.98, 2.83	3.16	0.00	2.67, 3.66
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	0.28	0.04	0.01, 0.55	0.11	0.45	−0.17, 0.38
Education (ref. max. elementary)						
Vocational training without baccalaureate	0.65	0.01	0.13,1.16	0.18	0.50	−0.34, 0.70
Baccalaureate	0.46	0.08	−0.06, 0.99	0.13	0.64	−0.43, 0.69
Higher education	0.38	0.19	−0.20, 0.96	−0.12	0.68	−0.71, 0.46
Marital status (ref. single)						
Married	−0.10	0.63	−0.50, 0.30	0.01	0.97	−0.40, 0.41
In relationship	−0.51	0.07	−1.06, 0.03	−0.64	0.02	−1.16, −0.12
Divorced	0.10	0.71	−0.41, 0.60	0.19	0.46	−0.31, 0.69
Widow/widower	0.11	0.75	−0.55, 0.76	0.02	0.95	−0.64, 0.69
Age	−0.01	0.21	−0.02, 0.00	−0.01	0.03	−0.03, −0.00
Church attendance (ref. at least weekly)						
Monthly	0.31	0.29	−0.26, 0.88	0.07	0.84	−0.62, 0.76
Couple times per year	0.11	0.66	−0.39, 0.62	0.28	0.37	−0.33, 0.89
Never	0.64	0.02	0.08, 1.19	0.08	0.82	−0.58, 0.73
Subjective income status (ref. have financial difficulties)						
Coping with present income	0.47	0.04	0.03, 0.90	0.16	0.47	−0.28, 0.60
Make ends meet or live comfortably	0.55	0.03	0.06, 1.03	0.25	0.31	−0.23, 0.74

Table 4. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Children in the household (ref. no children)						
At least one child	−0.03	0.86	−0.40, 0.34	−0.26	0.16	−0.62, 0.10
Settlement type (ref. larger cities)						
Smaller cities	0.33	0.07	−0.02, 0.69	0.11	0.54	−0.26, 0.48
Villages	−0.01	0.95	−0.35, 0.33	−0.34	0.04	−0.68, −0.01
Ethnic background (ref. Hungarian)						
Roma	−0.69	0.04	−1.37, −0.02	−0.48	0.24	−1.27, 0.32
Other ethnic minority	−0.30	0.47	−1.11, 0.51	0.74	0.17	−0.32, 1.80
Party preference (ref. FIDESZ-KDNP)						
Other party	0.35	0.06	−0.01, 0.71	0.40	0.03	0.03, 0.77
Unknown preference	0.25	0.17	−0.11, 0.60	0.20	0.27	−0.15, 0.55
cut1	−2.90	0.00	−4.05, −1.76	−2.87	0.00	−4.10, −1.64
cut2	−0.61	0.30	−1.76, 0.54	−0.98	0.11	−2.20, 0.24
cut3	1.07	0.07	−0.10, 2.23	0.73	0.24	−0.50, 1.97
cut4	2.62	0.00	1.42, 3.83	2.00	0.00	0.72, 3.28
Observations	969			961		

6.3. Differences in Competence: Qualitative Reasons

Of the 500 respondents, 22 selected "do not know," and 488 answered the closed question ("Is raising a child alone more difficult for a mother or for a father?"). Forty-eight (9,8%) believed that it is more difficult for single mothers, while 77 (15,7%) replied that single fathers have a more difficult task. Consequently, the remaining 363 respondents found single fatherhood to be as difficult as single motherhood. Furthermore, there is no remarkable difference regarding the gender of the respondents, as 11.8% of female and 7.8% of male respondents replied that the situation of single mothers is more difficult, while approximately 13% of both genders believe that the task of single fathers is more difficult. Thirty respondents gave an explanation for their answer about single mothers, 52 did so about single fathers, and 206 gave their opinions on the neutral position.

Almost all of the explanations regarding the difficulty of single motherhood emphasized that women tend to be financially poorer than men. Respondents elaborated that it is more difficult for women to find a job, and women usually have a lower level of income than men, and that single mothers are in an even more disadvantageous situation in the labour market. The other theme was the perception that mothers generally have to deal with more tasks than men, but the respondents did not elaborate on this aspect. A 64-year-old female respondent explicitly claimed that single fathers are usually not the real caregivers of their children: "Most of the fathers dump their children on grandparents or find a stepmother as soon as possible. There are some honorable exceptions, but those are very rare."

Regarding fathers, the most dominant category mentioned was the traditional caregiver role of mothers and how this makes single fathers less competent. Respondents emphasized that women have a maternal instinct, while fathers need to learn how to be a good parent. Fathers were, furthermore, seen as less caring and patient with their children and incapable of understanding children's feelings. For instance, a 31-year-old female respondent highlighted: "Mothers are biologically more capable of meeting their children's needs, they hold them, hug them differently, they organize their tasks better, they sing more beautifully, they are more efficient, and they cook delicious foods." A 21-year-old male respondent highlighted, in particular, that it could be harder for single fathers to raise girls, but he also added that it might not be easier with boys. A 30-year-old male respondent remarked that, in his opinion, it depends on the age of the child. The other connected theme was that fathers do not have a routine regarding performing household tasks. In addition, a group of answers highlighted that single motherhood is more accepted in our society than single fatherhood. As a 26-year-old male respondent explained: "The mother–child relation is highlighted in our society. Single parenthood is more unnatural for fathers, it is not expected, it is alien to the classic male role. It could lead to humiliating situations, or to stigmatization."

Those respondents who selected the neutral position usually emphasized that single mothers and fathers need to face the same problems: They need to do the work of two parents, they have to be both breadwinner and caregiver, and the family has only one income instead of two. Respondents also explained that single parents cannot fulfil the gender-specific tasks of the other parent: "Both partners have strengths and vulnerabilities, and they could compensate for each other. However, there is no balance when there is only one of them; so it can happen that they have different problems, but both have some" (19-year-old female).

Another group of respondents highlighted that, as neither single-father nor single-mother families are traditional ones, the children will suffer in some way, irrespective of the gender of the custodial parent. Two respondents described this aspect as follows: "The two-parent family is the traditional, adequate and balanced" (50-year-old male); and "It is hard to the same extent for both mothers and fathers, as the child is going to be brought up in a broken family. He/she will suffer both financially and emotionally" (33-year-old female).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The article contributed to the literature by testing the existence of the double standard previously identified in studies from the US on perceptions of single mothers and fathers within another context: Hungary in the 2010s–2020s. This context provided a particularly relevant setting for investigation, as Hungary, since the 2010s, was marked by conservative governments promoting traditional family ideals and gender roles. At the same time, the increasing share of single fathers and more lenient joint-custody legislation suggested that this double standard might be weakening. Furthermore, the article expanded the field by linking perceptions of single parents to the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood.

The results showed that respondents more often associated positive warmth-related traits—such as heroic, likeable, family-oriented, responsible, or self-sacrificing—with single fathers, similar to findings in the United States. In contrast, perceptions of competence were mixed, with some traits linked more to mothers and others to fathers. Overall, although positive traits were more often attributed to single fathers, single mothers were not viewed negatively; most respondents assigned them either positive or mixed stereotypes, often

conveying pity or compassion. This suggests that in Hungary, the double standard in this dimension exists but is less pronounced.

The second analysis focused on single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence in parenting alone. Results showed that a larger share of the Hungarian population viewed single mothers as just as capable of raising their children as two-parent families, indicating that a double standard exists in the competence dimension. Support for both single mothers and single fathers increased steadily between 1988 and 2024—from 25% to nearly 42% for single mothers, and from 13% to 30% for single fathers. Single mothers consistently received more support, and there was a gap of about 10% throughout the examined period.

Regarding the determinants of single mothers' and fathers' capability, the results showed that the traditional hypothesis that more liberal views on parenting predict more acceptance of both single mothers and fathers, seems to be only partly true: only regarding the breadwinner role of fathers and the caring role of mothers. Meanwhile, in the case of single mothers, the belief that mothers should be primarily responsible for breadwinning was associated with a lower likelihood of accepting single motherhood.

This suggests that, beyond traditional gender views, economic considerations may also play a role. In this context, financial realities likely influenced attitudes, as those who believed mothers should take on the main financial responsibility may also have recognized that women still faced structural disadvantages in the labour market. As a result, they may perceive single motherhood as less viable due to the difficulty of combining breadwinning and caregiving on typically lower incomes and in less secure positions compared to partnered households, where a male partner can help to balance these two roles. The importance of financial resources was also evident in both models when controlling for subjective income status. In both cases, individuals with a better financial position were more likely to support single motherhood or fatherhood, suggesting that financial stability plays a key role in shaping perceptions of single parents.

Furthermore, results also highlighted the importance of incorporating the concept of involved fatherhood in the investigation of these attitudes. Agreement with the idea that fathers should be engaged in playing with their children and serving as role models was associated with a decreased perception of the capability of both single mothers and single fathers. This suggests that, even when practical parenting tasks are seen as manageable by a single parent, the emotional and relational dimensions of parenting remain tied to the ideal of a two-parent family. It also indicates that the notion of involved fatherhood does not necessarily imply that a father is perceived as fully capable of handling all parenting responsibilities on his own.

Meanwhile, qualitative results also showed that gender stereotypes still influenced perceptions, as respondents emphasized that mothers are naturally better caretakers than men, while regarding single mothers, respondents noted that they tended to be poorer. Furthermore, qualitative results indicated that the age of the child is an influential factor, suggesting a smaller gap in perceived competence between single fathers and mothers of older children. Beyond parenting roles, attitudes toward alternative family forms also appeared to be influential in both quantitative and qualitative investigations.

Altogether, these results showed that attitudes partly aligned with the government's policies. While joint custody had become easier, supporting the involvement of both parents and elevating fathers' roles, there was moderate support for the idea that a single parent could raise a child as well as two parents together.

The data also suggested that involved fatherhood was viewed as belonging mainly to two-parent families, not necessarily supporting either single mothers or single fathers. Furthermore, consistent with the government's strong emphasis on "traditional families," the results indicated that acceptance of alternative family types was the most important explanatory factor. This suggests that in Hungary, perceptions of single parents are shaped less by gender stereotypes and more by attitudes toward family norms.

Finally, these results underline that policies supporting parents' work–life balance (e.g., paid leave, childcare, part-time work) can strengthen single mothers' and fathers' perceived ability to raise children. Promoting women's employment and financial support can improve their earning capacity and bolster their dual role as carers and breadwinners. Likewise, encouraging fathers' involvement—especially with young children—can enhance their perceived caregiving competence and narrow the gap in how single mothers and fathers are perceived compared to two-parent families.

Limitations of the study include the fact that the different datasets analysed were collected in different years over the past decade. However, as attitudes and stereotypes typically change slowly, this may introduce some temporal bias, but it likely still reflects stable societal views. Moreover, the study focused more on the competence dimension than on warmth; therefore, qualitative interview data or more specialized survey questions could provide a more nuanced understanding of perceptions related to warmth.

Further research could investigate different subgroups of single parents, as the double standard might be stronger regarding never-married single parents and weaker in the case of widowed or divorced single parents. It would also be important to investigate international differences in these perceptions to explore the link between policies and stereotypes/attitudes.

Acknowledgments

This article was supported by the Janos Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Funding

Publication of this article 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 author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated during the current study is not publicly available, as it contains proprietary information that the author acquired through a license. Information on how to obtain it and reproduce the analysis is available from the corresponding author on request.

LLMs Disclosure

The author utilised ChatGPT (OpenAI) to review the manuscript for grammar and style. ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing and not for any other aspect of the manuscript.

References

2023-as örökbefogadási statisztika: A hajó megfordul. (2024, July 28). *Örökbe.hu*. https://orokbe.hu/2024/07/28/2023-as-orokbefogadasi-statisztika-a-hajo-megfordul

Anderson, C., & Anderson, M. (2005). Single-parent families: Strengths, vulnerabilities, and interventions. In B. Carter & M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives* (pp. 399–416). Pearson.

Bennett, M., & Jamieson, L. (1999). Perceptions of parents as a function of their marital status and sex. *Infant and Child Development*, *8*, 149–154. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1522-7219(199909)8:3%3C149::AID-ICD196%3E3.0.CO;2-5

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryan, L. R., Coleman, M., Ganong, L. H., & Bryan, S. H. (1986). Person perception: Family structure as a cue for stereotyping. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *48*(1), 169–174. https://doi.org/10.2307/352241

Bulanda, R. E. (2004). Paternal involvement with children: The influence of gender ideologies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*, 40–45.

Coles, R. L. (2009). *Best kept secret: Single Black fathers*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Cuddy, A J. C., Fiske, S. T., & Glick, P. (2008). Warmth and competence as universal dimensions of social perception: The stereotype content model and the BIAS map. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *40*(1), 61–149.

DeJean, S. L., McGeorge, C. R., & Carlson T. S. (2012). Attitudes toward never-married single mothers and fathers: Does gender matter? *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, *24*(2), 121–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2012.648121

Dermott, E. (2008). *The intimate father. A sociological analysis*. Routledge.

Eagly, A. H., & Mladinic, A. (1994). Are people prejudiced against women? Some answers from research on attitudes, gender stereotypes, and judgments of competence. In W. Stroebe & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *European review of social psychology* (Vol 5, pp. 1–35). Wiley.

Eagly, A. H., Mladinic, A., & Otto, S. (1994). Cognitive and affective bases of attitudes toward social groups and social policies. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *30*, 113–137.

Eckes, T. (2002). Paternalistic and envious gender stereotypes: Testing predictions from the stereotype content model. *Sex Roles*, *47*, 99–114. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021020920715

Fiske, S. T. (2010). Venus and Mars or down to earth: Stereotypes and realities of gender differences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *5*(6), 688–692.

Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 878–902.

Fodor, E. (2022). *The gender regime of anti-liberal Hungary*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85312-9

Foster, C. H. (2008). The welfare queen: Race, gender, class and public opinion. *Race, Gender, and Class*, *15*(3/4), 162–179.

Ganong, L. W., Coleman, M., & Riley, C. (1988). Nursing students' stereotypes of married and unmarried pregnant clients. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *11*(5), 333–342. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770110508

Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1995). The content of mother stereotypes. *Sex Roles*, *32*(7), 495–512. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01544185

Gerson, K. (2010). *The unfinished revolution: How a new generation is reshaping family, work, and gender in America*. Oxford University Press.

Gilman, E. (2014). The return of the welfare queen. *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & The Law*, *22*(2), 247–279.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(3), 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality. *American Psychologist*, *56*(2), 109–118. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.2.109

Grád, A., Jánoskúti, G., & Kőrös, A. (2008). Mítosz és valóság—A gyermekelhelyezési perek tapasztalatai a statisztikai adatok fényében. *Családi Jog*, *4*(4), 8–15.

Greif, G. L. (1995). On becoming a single father with custody. In J. L. Shapiro, M. J. Diamond, & M. Greenburg (Eds.), *Becoming a father: Contemporary, social, developmental, and clinical perspectives* (pp. 83–91). Springer.

Grolnick, W. S., & Gurland, S. T. (2002). Mothering: Retrospect and prospect. In J. McHale & W. Grolnick (Eds.), *Retrospect and prospect in the psychological study of families* (pp. 5–33). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Haire, A. R., & McGeorge, C. R. (2012). Negative perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers: Applications of a gender analysis for family therapists. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, *24*(1), 24–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2012.629130

Hamer, J., & Marchioro, K. (2002). Becoming custodial dads: Exploring parenting among low-income and working-class African American fathers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *64*, 116–129.

Hancock, A. (2004). *The politics of disgust: The public identity of the welfare queen*. NYU Press.

Herke, B. (2021). Investigating the welfare deservingness of single mothers: Public image and deservingness perceptions in Hungary. *East European Politics and Societies*, *35*(3), 613–637. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420937773

Hofferth, S. (2003). Race/ethnic differences in father involvement in two-parent families: Culture, context, or economy? *Journal of Family Issues*, *24*, 185–216.

HCSO. (2025). *Népszámlálás 2022*. https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/adatbazis/

Jordan, V., Stewart, K., & Janta, B. (2019). *Mechanisms supporting single parents across the European Union: Report for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3ade5c22-b4d7-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Kaufman, G., & Uhlenberg, P. (2000). The influence of parenthood on the work effort of married men and women. *Social Forces*, *78*, 931–949.

Leslie, L. A., & Clossick, M. L. (1992). Changing set: Teaching family therapy from a feminist perspective. *Family Relations*, *41*(3), 256–263. https://doi.org/10.2307/585188

Leslie, L. A., & Southard, A. L. (2009). Thirty years of feminist family therapy. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 328–339). Sage.

McGill, B. S. (2014). Navigating new norms of involved fatherhood: Employment, fathering attitudes, and father involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, *35*(8), 1089–1106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14522247

Meyer, D. R., & Garasky, S. (1993). Custodial fathers: Myths, realities, and child support policy. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *55*(1), 73–89. https://doi.org/10.2307/352960

Monostori, J. (2015). Az egyszülős családdá válás az életútban és annak demográfiai meghatározói. *Demográfia*, *58*(1), 27–56.

Monostori, J. (2023). Váltott gyermekgondoskodás szakértői szemmel. *Socio.hu*, *13*(2), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2023.2.1

Murinkó, L., & Szalma, I. (2016). Fatherhood and men's second union formation: Norway, France and Hungary, 1980s–2000s. In D. Mortelmans, K. Matthijs, E. Alofs, & B. Segaert (Eds.), *Changing family dynamics and demographic evolution: The family kaleidoscope* (pp. 179–213). Edward Elgar.

Nieuwenhuis, R., & Maldonado, L. (Eds.). (2018). *The triple bind of single-parent families: Resources, employment and policies to improve wellbeing*. Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2204rvq

Okimoto, T. G., & Heilman, M. E. (2012). The "bad parent" assumption: How gender stereotypes affect reactions to working mothers. *Journal of Social Issues*, *68*(4), 704–724. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01772.x

Orloff, A. S. (1993). Gender and the social rights of citizenship: The comparative analysis of gender relations and welfare states. *American Sociological Review*, *58*(3), 303–328. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095903

Oswald, R. F., Blume, L. B., & Marks, S. R. (2005). Decentering heteronormativity: A model for family studies. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 143–165). Sage.

Pető, A., & Juhász, B. (2024). Legacies and recipe of constructing successful righteous motherhood policies: The case of Hungary. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *103*, Article 102885. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102885

Rohde, A., & Takács, J. (2023). Can gender studies be in exile? An introduction. *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, *8*(4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i4.1112

Shorey, S., & Pereira, T. L. (2023). Parenting experiences of single fathers: A meta-synthesis. *Family Process*, *62*(3), 1093–1113. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12830

Szalma, I., & Rékai, K. (2019). Szülői felügyeleti jog, kapcsolattartás és tartásdíjfizetés a különélő magyar szülők gyakorlatában. *Szociológiai Szemle*, *29*(4), 84–114. https://doi.org/10.51624/SzocSzemle.2019.4.4

Takács, J. (2020). How involved are involved fathers in Hungary? Exploring caring masculinities in a post-socialist context. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(3), 487–502. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674319X15592179267974

TÁRKI Omnibusz. (1988). *ISSP 1988: Család és változó nemi szerepek I. magyar adatok*. TÁRKI Adatbank.

TÁRKI Omnibusz. (2013). *Társadalompolitikai attitűdök Magyarországon a felnőtt lakosság körében—ISSP 2012. Család és változó nemi szerepek IV. magyar adatok*. TÁRKI Adatbank.

Townsend, N. W. (2002). *The package deal: Marriage, work, and fatherhood in men's lives*. Temple University Press.

Turchi, J. A. (2014). *Single father families: The mediating role of parents' resources, stress and family environment on children's physical and emotional wellbeing* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The University of Iowa. https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.et54gwyv

Visontai-Szabó, K. (2014). *A szülői felügyeleti jogok gyakorlása rendezésének jogi keretei, pszichológiai háttere és problémái* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Szeged.

About the Author



Boglárka Herke (PhD) is a research fellow at the Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences. Her main research interests include single-parent families, welfare attitudes, attitudes towards single-parent families, family policy, and family sociology.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10983
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10983

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

"This Kind of Thing Does Not Really Exist in Russia": Russian Fathers Negotiating Shared Care Arrangements

Ekaterina Ivanova [1,2]

[1] Nossal Institute for Global Health, University of Melbourne, Australia
[2] School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: Ekaterina Ivanova (ekaterina.ivanova@unimelb.edu.au)

Submitted: 21 July 2025 **Accepted:** 19 January 2026 **Published:** 5 March 2026

Issue: This article 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 article explores fathers' experiences of shared care arrangements in Russia after family separation. While shared physical custody has become increasingly normative in many Western countries, Russian legal and cultural frameworks continue to position mothers as the default parents, rendering fathers' involvement largely invisible. The article draws on nine semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 and 2022 with fathers whose children spent at least 35% of their time in their care. Using narrative and reflective thematic analysis, this article identifies four strategies fathers employed to navigate the fragility of their involvement, namely by valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and by being a "damn good" father. It also explores how fathers manage the complex emotions associated with their precarious position as carers and how they rely on certain traditional masculine practices to regain a sense of certainty and control. This study contributes to the broader conversation on involved fatherhood in the post-socialist context by examining how Russian fathers not only negotiate shared custody but also challenge the model of marginalised fatherhood, seeking a more active, long-term presence in their children's lives.

Keywords

divorce; family separation; fatherhood; Russia; shared care

1. Introduction

Fathering is intrinsically shaped by legal and cultural contexts within which it is experienced (Shwalb et al., 2013). Social researchers, emphasising fatherhood as a social, not a biological category, argue that men are

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

"made" into fathers with the combination of policies, cultural norms, and public discourses (Gregory & Milner, 2008; Morgan, 2002). In a number of Western countries, post-separation fatherhood has undergone significant transformations over the last few decades, which made visible and supported fathers' involvement in everyday parenting beyond financial support (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Parkinson, 2011). Legislatively, this trend has been supported by the shift towards shared physical custody, also referred to as shared care or shared parenting (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Fehlberg et al., 2011; Moloney, 2009; Parkinson, 2011). These changes have offered fathers new ways to experience parenting after separation and invoked the reorganisation of masculinity around new ideals of good fathering (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Bridgeman et al., 2016; Joshi, 2021; Philip, 2013). Feminist scholars, however, point out the complex, and not necessarily positive, outcomes of such a shift towards shared care, which provides new legal means and discursive resources to maintain gendered control after separation (Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg & Millward, 2014; Natalier et al., 2019).

Family separation is a common experience in Russia, with the crude divorce rate being one of the highest globally: 4.7 divorces per 1000 people as per data from 2022 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2022). Yet fathers' involvement after family separation has not received the same level of cultural recognition or legal support that characterises many Western contexts (Bezrukova & Samoylova, 2020; Kay, 2007; Rotkirch et al., 2007; Utrata et al., 2013). Historically, Russia was a pioneer in divorce law reform, introducing the concept of "no-fault divorce" in 1918 and shared legal custody in 1969, but it has yet to establish legal provisions for shared physical custody (Antokolskaia, 2020). Consequently, children's residence can be legally assigned to only one parent, while the non-resident parent is granted visitation rights and expected to pay child support. While the law is formally gender-neutral and leaves an opportunity for parents to negotiate parenting arrangements informally, statistics show that more than 90% of children reside with their mothers following separation (Rzhanitsyna & Kalabikhina, 2012). A more recent study also demonstrates that more than 50% of separated fathers in Russia do not have a monthly contact with their children (Heers & Szalma, 2022). This pattern of involvement aligns with the traditionalist and pronatalist logic of both the Russian and, previously, Soviet state, in which mothers have been constructed as default parents, i.e., primary caregivers and key decision-makers, and continue to be positioned as such in legal practice and by social services (Bezrukova & Samoylova, 2020; Kay, 2007).

Some scholars suggest that limited institutional support impacts Russian fathers' low involvement in childcare in comparison with fathers from other countries (Kravchenko, 2012; Lipasova, 2017). More traditional gender attitudes remain widespread in Russia, and these have been shown to be associated with infrequent paternal contact with children following separation (Heers & Szalma, 2022). Russian fathers seem to easily embrace their position as non-resident parents who take care of their children primarily through financial support (Ivanova, 2025; Utrata, 2008), which is perceived as a gendered way of showing love and fatherly care (Ivanova, 2025). Some studies suggest that this position benefits fathers by allowing them to disengage from care work without facing moral or social consequences (Ivanova, 2025; Utrata, 2008). While the view on Russian fathers as detached, disinterested, and inadequate carers (Kay, 2007; Utrata, 2008, 2015) remains dominant, some studies make visible more diverse motivations and parenting arrangements, including examples of fathers committed to equally sharing care and instances of them acting as primary carers (Ivanova, 2017; Kay, 2007). Such experiences, however, remain underrepresented in scholarship on Russian fatherhood.

This article seeks to address this gap by focusing specifically on Russian fathers who practised shared care of their children after family separation. Drawing on nine interviews collected in 2015 and 2022 with fathers whose children spent at least 35% of their time in their care during that interval, the article situates fathers' experiences of negotiating shared care within a legal and cultural context that renders their involvement invisible. Using thematic narrative analysis, the article explores four strategies fathers employed to navigate their involvement post-separation—valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and by being a "damn good" father—which will be described in detail in the following sections.

2. Data and Method

This article draws on two sets of semi-structured interviews with Russian fathers who had separated when their children were under the age of 18. The first set of 18 interviews was collected in 2015, and the second set of 25 interviews took place in 2022. The article focuses specifically on a subsample of nine fathers—drawn from both datasets—who practised shared care arrangements after separation.

In 2015, participants were recruited by the author using snowball sampling in two major Russian cities, Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Most had a university degree and above-average incomes. In 2022, recruitment was conducted through a combination of the author's personal networks, snowballing, and the assistance of a professional recruiter, whose help was instrumental in obtaining a more diverse sample. Among fathers interviewed in 2022, sixteen lived in large metropolitan cities with populations over one million (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Nizhniy Novgorod, Kazan, Volgograd), five in mid-sized cities with populations of 500,000–600,000 (Irkutsk, Lipetsk, Penza, Yaroslavl), and four in smaller urban centres with populations of 100,000–300,000 (Pskov, Vologda, Cherepovets, Gelendzhik). The majority of participants had incomes above the national average for 2022. Sixteen participants held tertiary degrees, and the rest had secondary professional qualifications.

As no significant legal reforms were affecting post-separation parenting during this period, it was deemed appropriate to combine data from both samples for analysis. While there is no legal definition of shared care or shared physical custody in Russia, guidelines from other countries were used (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Flaquer, 2021). Accordingly, participants were included in the subsample if they cared for their children—meaning the children stayed overnight with them and they made routine decisions about their care and wellbeing—for at least 35% of the time compared with their ex-partners. The socio-demographic profile of the nine participants in the subsample is presented in Table 1, along with a brief description of their parenting arrangements.

In 2015, all interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the author. Participants residing in Saint Petersburg were interviewed in person, while participants from other cities were interviewed via Skype. In 2022, all interviews were conducted by the author either in person, by phone, or via Zoom, and were transcribed by hired research assistants. The use of different modes of communication did not appear to differentially affect data quality; participants interviewed both in person and online offered rich narratives and appeared comfortable sharing their personal stories. In 2022, verbal informed consent was obtained and audio-recorded from all participants in accordance with the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics approval. In 2015, participants were informed about the study, its aims, the confidentiality of information, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the study; however, no formal consent was collected, as ethical review procedures were not required for this type of research in Russia at the time.

Table 1. Participants description.

No.	Pseudonym	Year of interview	Age	City of residence	Education	Year of separation	Length of relationship	Number and age of children (in brackets)	Relationship status post-separation	Arrangements (description)
1	Stepan	2015	36	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2012	12 years	1 (8)	Remarried	Son resides primarily with father, staying with mother overnight on an irregular schedule.
2	Daniil	2015	34	Saint-Petersburg	Secondary professional & Unfinished tertiary	2010	13 years	1 (7)	Remarried	Daughter had stayed 10 days with father and 4 days with mother every fortnight for two years post-separation; later changed to one full week with father, followed by two full weeks with mother.
3	Alexandr	2015	45	Moscow	Tertiary	2010	13 years	2 (12, 16)	Single	Both sons had lived with their mother full-time for a year after the separation, then moved to their father full-time.
4	Anton	2022	30	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2021	7 years	1 (6)	Single	Son stays 3 nights every week with father.
5	Timur	2022	40	Saint-Petersburg	Tertiary	2020	6 years	1 (4)	Single	Son stays with father for a few full weeks on an irregular schedule.
6	Alexey	2022	39	Saint-Petersburg	Secondary Professional	2020	12 years	1 (10)	Single	Son stays 5 nights every week with father.
7	Maxim	2022	32	Moscow	Tertiary	2020	8 years	1 (10)	Partnered	Daughter stays 3 nights every week with father.

Table 1. (Cont.) Participants description.

No.	Pseudonym	Year of interview	Age	City of residence	Education	Year of separation	Length of relationship	Number and age of children (in brackets)	Relationship status post-separation	Arrangements (description)
8	Kirill	2022	38	Gelendzik	Tertiary	2012	7 years	1 (16)	Remarried	Daughter lived with father full-time for the first two years post-separation, seeing mother on the weekend; later reversed to residing with mother and spending one night on the weekends with father.
9	Karim	2022	41	Kazan'	Secondary Professional	2016	16 years	2 (19, 14)	Single	Both sons had lived full-time with father for several years after separation, seeing mother on an occasional basis. Later, the older son stayed with father, the younger moved to stay with mother full-time.

Fieldwork in 2022 took place during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, unlike in some other countries (Szalma, 2020), no restrictions were in place that would have affected post-separation co-parenting. The only government-imposed restriction was the requirement to present a vaccination certificate to access certain public venues, such as cafés.

Interviews were analysed using a combination of narrative and reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Riessman, 2008). This combined approach makes it possible to identify themes—patterns of shared meaning—within the data, while also attending to how participants narratively structured and conveyed their experiences in culturally meaningful ways. Reflexivity is achieved by making explicit the researcher's interpretive work in generating themes, which do not "naturally" emerge from the data but are developed by the researcher in line with their analytical focus (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For this study, I identified a subgroup of fathers because I wanted to understand how their experiences of shared care—still relatively uncommon not only in Russia but elsewhere—unfold within the Russian legal and cultural context. I developed four themes, which captured the ways interviewed fathers made sense of their post-separation involvement, in relation to the structural position they found themselves in. In the analysis that follows, excerpts from interviews are used to illustrate key themes. Each excerpt is accompanied by brief contextual information, including the participant's pseudonym and care arrangements.

3. Negotiating the Default Parent Norm Within the Institutional Invisibility of Involved Fatherhood

Russian fathers had to negotiate shared care in the legal, institutional, and cultural context that positioned mothers as "default" carers and rendered fathers' involvement invisible. This disposition was clear in fathers' recollections of their encounters with the law and with institutions that exercised—and, to a certain degree, had discretion to interpret—the law. Anton recalled that during the divorce procedure, despite his son spending three nights with him every week after separation, his son's residence was still officially established with his ex-partner, the boy's mother:

> A: They have three questions: where the child lives, child support, and the division of property. We didn't have any issues—we were in full agreement.
>
> Q: Was that written into the claim? Or did the judge ask you?
>
> A: He asked us. Maybe we signed something, I don't remember exactly.
>
> Q: So, he was like: "Who's the child staying with?" And you said…
>
> A: With the mom, yeah.
>
> Q: With the mom? So, you didn't mention your arrangement?
>
> A: No, no—because that kind of thing doesn't really exist in Russia. As far as I know, the child stays…
>
> Q: Yeah, legally—no, it doesn't.

> A: Exactly, so—with the mom. (#4 Anton, 3 nights a week)

In the absence of a shared physical custody regime, Anton's parenting arrangement was unintelligible to the law, leaving him and other fathers in this study with the option to negotiate shared care informally. The inevitable informality of shared care arrangements in the Russian legal context made fathers' position as carers fragile, especially in cases of disagreement or conflict. For example, Daniil described how his ex-partner filed a child support order, claiming that their daughter lived with her permanently, even though, according to Daniil, the child had spent half the time with him for two years following separation. While Daniil tried to contest the order, he was unsuccessful. For Daniil, the lost case was not just about the money; he was particularly hurt by the erasure of his fathering, legitimized by the court's enforcement of the order:

> At first, yeah, I was pretty upset—especially when I saw in the child support claim that it said the child lives *entirely* with the mother. That the child is *fully* in her care. Like, the kid is completely hers, and the dad doesn't even exist, hasn't even been around. It was honestly disgusting to read. Naturally, I lost the case—well, of course, in our country. I even hired a lawyer. Shouldn't have, really—there was no point in that. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives with him every second week)

Alexandr had challenging and pressing circumstances. A father of two, Alexandr had been living with his younger son soon after he and his partner separated. One day, he learned that his ex-partner was planning to move to another region—and intended to take their younger son with her. According to Alexandr, the boy was strongly opposed to this plan. The move would separate him from his father and older brother and abruptly disrupt the promising start of his musical career. Living in a larger city had given him access to teachers, mentors, and opportunities that nurtured his talent, and leaving would jeopardize all of that. Determined to keep his son with him, Alexandr sought help from social services and even contacted the police. What he received in response, however, was an unexpectedly curious piece of advice:

> We went to the child welfare services. They told us it was a completely hopeless situation, because she's the mother, and she has the right. That was it. It was clear. I realized: Yeah, well, that's how it's going to be. Then I decided to go to the police—just on a whim. I thought, what the hell, let me try the police [laughs]….There were two women officers there, and they were in an unusually good mood—probably because no one ever comes to them with stuff like this. I told them the story. I said: "Look, I'm not really expecting help here, but…maybe?" One of them repeated word-for-word what the child services had said: That there's nothing that can be done, that she's the mother, and what she says goes. Especially since the older child lives with me. But the other one—she was a bit more feisty—said: "Well, you could just kidnap him." The first one goes: "Are you crazy? You can't say that! You can't tell people to do that! What kind of advice is that?" And the second one shrugs and says: "What? He's got rights, too. He's the father, isn't he?" Then she turns to me and asks: "You are the father, right?" I said: "Yes, of course, I'm the father." And she says: "Well, there you go." (#3 Alexandr, sons live with the father full-time)

Alexandr described his experience almost like an adventure—one that, in the end, turned out happily for him, as he succeeded in continuing to live with both of his sons. He spoke with a touch of irony about how powerless he appeared in the eyes of child services and the police. Yet his story also points to a deeper structural disposition: In Russia, fathers who wished to share the care of their children after separation, and to have a say in how that care was arranged, had little legal power to define and secure their involvement.

In Aleksandr's case, although his former partner ultimately accepted the arrangement after their son clearly expressed a preference to live with his father, she retained formal sole custody of both children. The arrangement remained informal, and Aleksandr never considered it feasible to seek a formal revision of custody through the court.

The "default parent" norm underlined fathers' negotiations with their ex-partners, who at times also rendered fathers' care work invisible. According to Stepan, his son had been living with him permanently, with his daily routines, school, and extracurricular activities centred around Stepan's home, while only occasionally spending nights with his mother, and without any regular schedule in place. His ex-partner, however, seemed to see their arrangement in a completely different light, as Stepan explained: "She believed that he still lived with her. And he only stayed with me when it was convenient for her." Similarly, Daniil explained that, although he and his ex-partner had agreed on a "week on/week off" arrangement, in practice his daughter spent most of her time living with him for about two years after their separation. This was until his ex-partner demanded a stark revision of that schedule:

> A: Basically, at some point, she came to me and was like: "The kid spends two weeks with me and one week with you now." So it flipped—just like that. Pretty harsh. And then she started with this whole thing: *"The child needs a base."* Like, very firm about it.
>
> Q: A base meaning—the child should have one home?
>
> A: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. *A base.* And that base—according to her—was with her. It was just so sudden. I mean, we were living like we were, till March, and then one day—bam—that was it. You know?
>
> Q: And did you ever question why the base shouldn't be with you?
>
> A: I did. Well—she's the mother. She had one argument: *"But I'm the mother." (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)*

In the narratives of Alexandr, Stepan, and Daniil, claims based on motherhood were reinforced not only by legal structures but also by cultural norms, making mothers' position as default parents particularly difficult to challenge. While the law defined fathers' ability to contest and secure parenting arrangements, cultural norms shaped how parents perceived these arrangements. Importantly, they also shaped how fathers themselves felt about their position as carers, as well as about the legal conundrums they found themselves in while trying to negotiate shared care after separation. While expressing frustration toward their ex-partners or concern about their involvement, or presenting it as a story worth telling, Russian fathers rarely communicated a sense of injustice or anger, overall accepting the "default parent" norm. Daniil, for example, somewhere in the interview, reflecting on his ex-partner's claims based on her position as a mother, said: "By nature….Mother is the priority, I agree with that."

The following section will explore the practical and narrative strategies Russian fathers employed to navigate the two systems—legal and cultural—without directly challenging the gendered moral order they were generally supportive of.

3.1. Valuing Informality and Flexibility

In the absence of legal regulation of shared physical custody, Russian fathers organised and negotiated shared care arrangements informally with their ex-partners. It was common to (re)negotiate children's changeovers ad hoc. Anton, for example, described that after separation, the process of "figuring out" shared parenting happened on a daily basis:

> It went something like: "He's with you today," "alright," "I'll take him in three days," "okay." It wasn't exactly like you were rolling dice, but….It was pretty much like that. (#4, Anton, 3 nights a week)

In their interviews, fathers tended to view such informal arrangements as a normal and convenient way to co-parent—one that offered flexibility to accommodate the changing priorities and life circumstances of different family members. In Anton's case, for instance, decisions about which parent their son stayed with depended on both parents' work commitments as well as their and their son's sports activities and hobbies. Even in cases where fathers took on the role of primary carer—at least for a certain period—and more long-term arrangements were established, a significant degree of flexibility remained. In Kirill's case, for example, his daughter lived with him for two years after the separation, visiting her mother only on weekends. This arrangement changed when his former partner wanted to take on a more intensive caregiving role, after she had secured a stable job and a place to live. At the time of the interview, Kirill saw his daughter only on weekends. He explained that she was very busy preparing for school exams during the week and that she had the freedom to decide when and for how long she wanted to visit him. Similarly, Karim assumed full-time care of their sons when his partner decided to separate and move from Kazan to the small village they originally came from. For several years, she saw the children only about once a month. Later, when the younger son expressed a desire to spend more time with his mother, he moved to live with her full-time, while the older son remained with his father. In both Karim and Kirill's cases, the arrangements were informal, and formal custody remained with the mother.

Such flexibility, however, depended on both parents' willingness to honour informal agreements, collaborate, and adjust, and even more so on mothers, who were legally entitled to be the default parents. The fragility of these arrangements became evident in cases of disagreement or conflict between parents. This was the case for Stepan, whose partner repeatedly violated their agreed schedule:

> So, here's how it goes. On Monday, she calls me and says: "I'll pick Vanya up from school on Wednesday." I say: "Alright, fine." A few hours later—maybe three—she calls again and says: "No, I won't pick him up on Wednesday, I'll pick him up from school on Friday." Tomorrow's Friday. So now I'm just waiting for another call to find out when exactly she's going to pick him up. Maybe she won't pick him up at all. Maybe she'll ask me to bring him over. Anything can happen. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights in his care)

Given the legal and cultural reinforcement of the "default parent" norm, mothers often held a stronger position regarding whether or not to adhere to informal arrangements. In interviews, fathers made sense of this structural disparity by shifting the focus from the legal to the moral dimension of shared care, emphasising trust rather than legal enforcement. Maxim, for example, when asked why he had never considered formalising his shared care arrangement, said: "It's a strange idea—that you shouldn't trust, but

formalise." Similarly, Alexey, whose son stayed with him most nights, responded to my question about whether he had ever thought about formalising their arrangement:

> No, why would I? I don't need that. You see, I'm just a kind and calm person by nature. I'm used to trusting people. (#6, Alexey, son stays 5 nights per week in his care)

The power of trust, however, had its limits, as mothers were legally entitled to full-time residence of their children in case of disagreement. Yet, by speaking about trust, fathers asserted a sense of agency and control. As Anton explained why he was comfortable with the judge formally designating the child's residence with the mother:

> A: Well, as I said, we have warm relations. If she says it will be this way—fine, I take her at her word.
>
> Q: Ah, so you mean you trust that she won't manipulate you or anything like that?
>
> A: Yes.
>
> Q: And what if she did?
>
> A: Then it would mean I was mistaken. (#4, Anton, son stays 3 nights a week in his care)

3.2. Not Picking Fights

Having to negotiate shared care in a cultural and institutional context that positions mothers as default parents, fathers' ability to mitigate confrontation, compromise, and let things go became important for maintaining their involvement after separation. Daniil, speaking about a revision to their care arrangement initiated by his ex-partner—one he did not fully agree with and which was described in more detail in the previous section—said he chose to let things go:

> About the whole "base" thing—maybe I lost that battle, but I didn't lose the war. What I mean is…I told [ex-partner's name]: "Don't pick a fight with me"—and I don't pick fights with her either. It's easier for me to accept those terms and keep the peace, rather than bang my head against a wall to get week-on, week-off, and have the relationship fall apart. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)

Anton, who once considered his legal options in contesting the maternal residence order, shared a similar reflection:

> What I realised is: For the sake of the kid, there's no point getting into petty bullshit over this. That helped me cool down much faster and stop…you know, digging deeper into the whole thing—trying to figure out ways to get back at my ex. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

Anton attributed his ability to "not get into petty bullshit" to his own personality, suggesting elsewhere in the interview that this was an unusual trait for a man—and one that perhaps helped him maintain a shared care

arrangement. To the contrary, Daniil narratively framed his ability to keep his cool and avoid petty arguments as a masculine quality, noting elsewhere in the interview: "It's a bit easier for men in this regard. They don't need to prove anything. Let her think that the 'base' is with her. I couldn't care less." Both cases illustrate how fathers narratively negotiated this strategy with the dominant image of masculinity, which may not sit easily with compromising. Some studies demonstrate that in other contexts, being ready to fight for one's children is interpreted as a manifestation of fathers' commitment to them (Collier & Sheldon, 2006). In interviews with Russian fathers, the narrative linkage between not fighting and masculinity could help participants reconcile with their lack of institutional power.

Daniil's interview also makes clear that this strategy was emotionally challenging: While claiming he "couldn't care less" about his position as an equal parent, Daniil, in other parts of the conversation, carefully counted the time his daughter spent with him, eager to show that he still had her almost half the time despite the revised arrangement. He also stressed that his home was just as organised and welcoming for his daughter as her mother's—a narrative that also emerged in Stepan's interview.

Stepan's experience was different from that of other participants, as he was the one who ended up taking legal action in order to define his son's residence with him. Stepan struggled with his ex-partner being unreliable in coparenting, often disregarding agreed schedules for changeovers and pickups and, as he put it, breaking off any arrangements whenever it suited her. Despite how frustrating this situation was for Stepan, for some time, he was able to "let things go" in order to make this fragile arrangement work—for both him and his son:

> She likes to call me when she's a bit tipsy and starts throwing her weight around. Before, she somehow managed to get under my skin, but now she doesn't anymore, thanks to my current wife, who told me: "Don't worry about it, she's just got nothing better to do, that's why she's messing with you. Just agree with everything." And I really started to respond that way. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

When, in Stepan's opinion, the situation became too unstable for his son, he pursued legal action. Stepan, however, was still careful to narrate his decision in a way that distanced him from appearing vindictive or motivated by a desire to take the child away from his mother:

> Well, if she were to say something like: "I've changed the job, I can make it work now, I live on my own, I want [son's name] to live with me"—then by all means. If all that is in place, and if it would be good and comfortable for the boy, then yes—by all means.
>
> Q: So you would hand him over with peace of mind?
>
> A: Yes, no problem. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

Stepan's reassurance that he was ready to revisit the residence arrangements as soon as his ex-partner became a more reliable carer—a moral judgement that some fathers in this study made about their ex-partners—highlighted the cultural expectation that the default parent should be the child's mother.

3.3. Gendering Child Support

While Stepan may have challenged the default parent norm, he still fulfilled another gendered expectation placed on fathers in Russia: financial provision. Despite having his son in his care most of the time after separation, he informally transferred 10,000 rubles (the equivalent of a month's rent at the moment of separation) to his ex-partner every month. He explained that, even though all his friends asked, "why are you doing this?" he "somehow felt that it was the right thing to do." Stepan's sense of obligation highlighted that, although Russian law is formally gender-neutral with regard to the financial obligations of non-resident parents, the payment of child support is commonly understood as a gendered responsibility expected of fathers rather than mothers.

Alexey, who—similar to Stepan—had his son most of the time, also paid informal child support after separation. He explained:

> I fully understood that a child needs financial support, and I was fine with that. Even when he lived with me—say we'd spend a whole month on holiday together—I'd still send the money. I could afford it back then, so why not? But later, when he started staying with me more often, I stopped paying her. (#6, Alexey, Son stays 5 nights per week with father)

For Alexey, paying child support was a bargaining strategy:

> Roughly speaking, as long as I could afford to pay, I did—so she wouldn't have extra reasons to pull the child away from me. As long as there are even some formal levers she can use against me, I'd rather not ruin the relationship. (#6, Alexey, Son stays 5 nights per week with father)

Alexey described that when he stopped paying child support, his ex-partner was "upset, felt betrayed, and offended." Although she did not apply for any child support order, her reaction indicated that informal support was an expected part of their post-separation agreement—regardless of how much caregiving Alexey was doing.

Besides Alexey and Stepan, large direct transfers from participants to their ex-partners were rare, as they believed they mostly met their financial obligations through in-kind support when children stayed in their care. Fathers were also reluctant to claim financial support from their ex-partners, even in cases when they took the primary care for their children. Fathers' accounts on child support demonstrated that such money was earmarked as gendered (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014); by refusing the need for financial support from their ex-partners, participants constructed their masculinities.

Anton recalled that, at some point, he and his ex-partner had tried to set up a system to share expenses, but it didn't work for him:

> Once I had to go to her with a receipt and…like, give her something back. And I was just like: I don't want to do this. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

He elaborated:

> For me…after the breakup, it started to feel a bit humiliating. Asking her to repay me. (#4 Anton, the son stays 3 nights a week)

Similarly, Daniil dismissed the idea of requesting financial contributions from his ex-partner, even when his daughter stayed with him the majority of the time:

> You know, over a few rubles, I'm not going to humiliate myself—well, not humiliate exactly….I don't even know how to put it. It just feels like being a cheapskate. It's a kind of disrespect to yourself as a man, in my opinion. Like, if a man goes to a woman and says, "give me 500 rubles for kindergarten"—I don't know, that's just nonsense. It feels like insulting yourself as a man. I don't know how else to say it. (#2, Daniil, the daughter lives every second week with him)

Stepan, who had to legally include child support in the paperwork as part of his residence order, engaged with a few arguments that justified this decision:

> A: We did include child support in the paperwork, but in court, we are going to say that we are not going to ask you for anything.
>
> Q: Why not?
>
> A: Maybe we will. We'll see. I don't want anything. But my wife said: "Think about it—even if she pays 4 or 5 thousand, that's training sessions covered. That's all that would be needed from her."
>
> Q: So why are you leaning towards not asking?
>
> A: [Paused] Honestly, I don't know. At first, I thought, why would I need money from her? But now, with the situation in the country getting worse…maybe she should contribute, actually. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

Overall, fathers' accounts of child support demonstrated that, while they were willing to challenge traditional gender norms of parenthood by taking on shared or primary care, they remained reluctant to de-gender child support by claiming any money from their ex-partners.

3.4. Being a "Damn Good" Father

In the absence of strong legal mechanisms to enforce shared custody, fathers often turned to moral claims to secure their involvement. Participants consistently described themselves as highly engaged and committed fathers. Many emphasised that their level of involvement far exceeded that of other men in their social circles. By presenting themselves as extraordinarily good fathers—dedicated and present—they sought to legitimise their involvement after separation.

> Even imagine a situation where I'd be completely cut off from my child—no, that's just not happening. I mean, come on—when you're a damn good father, it's just…obvious. It's clear the mother won't stand in the way of us having a relationship. And honestly, no one's going to be a better father to him than I am. (#4 Anton, 3 nights a week)

The emotional connection fathers had built through their involvement was foundational to their moral claim for shared parenting after separation. For instance, Daniil traced the foundation of his bond with his daughter back to her birth, a moment he described as transformative: "I saw the child from the very first second. This is probably why I have such a bond with her." Although he acknowledged that being present at childbirth was not typically expected of men—"not something a man is supposed to witness"—he saw himself as an exception, saying: "I've always been different…a bit of a crazy one." For Daniil, this early and continuous presence played a critical role in his ability to maintain a shared care arrangement after separation:

> You have to work on it. I mean, for some people it's work, for some it's hard. For me—it's not hard. My daughter is always with me everywhere, now and in the future. And the fact that, right now, roughly speaking, she spends 65% more time with her mom—that doesn't scare me. Because I've built a strong, serious foundation. Anyone who sees us, who knows her, can see it—we have a powerful bond. And that took effort. And breaking that…well, it would be really hard. But it doesn't seem like [ex-partner's name] has any plans to do that. She's even said: "*I have no intention of keeping the child away from you.*" *(#2, Daniil, the daughter lives with him every second week)*

This form of moral legitimation was also future-oriented. Fathers hoped that, when children reached an age at which they could decide for themselves, they would also like to live with the parent who had put in emotional labour and practical effort in making them settled and comfortable in their home. Alexandr, who had initiated legal proceedings to obtain official physical custody of his son, remained uncertain about the outcome, expressing concern that the Russian legal system might not rule in his favour. He placed his hopes in his son's ability to voice a preference to live with him, a choice he believed would be grounded in the strong relationship and stable daily routines they had already established:

> He's at an age where, sooner or later, he'll say: "*Mom, I want to stay with dad.*" And especially now—he's already gotten used to it: He's got his own room here, his own desk, his own bed, his toys. (#1, Stepan, son spends most nights at father's care)

Several fathers expressed both hope and anxiety about their long-term relationships with their children. This strategy thus served as a form of emotional coping, allowing fathers to hold on to a sense of paternal identity and hope, even in the face of limited or uncertain access to their children in the present. While these stories conveyed a sense of resilience, they also underscored the reality of a system that provides little support for fathers to secure and maintain substantial involvement with their children in the here and now.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The impact of social policy on fatherhood and its transformation is well acknowledged (Collier & Sheldon, 2008; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Gregory & Milner, 2008; Morgan, 2002; Parkinson, 2011), particularly in the context of separated fatherhood (Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg et al., 2011).

However, existing research in this area tends to focus on countries that actively support paternal involvement. This article offers a different perspective by examining a context that continues to marginalise fatherhood (Kay, 2007; Utrata et al., 2013). It explores how Russian fathers' experiences of shared parenting are shaped by interlocking legal and cultural norms that position mothers as the default parents and render fathers' involvement in childcare both invisible and precarious.

Drawing on nine interviews with separated fathers who cared for their children at least 35% of the time after family separation, the article identifies four strategies these fathers adopted to navigate the fragility of their involvement: valuing informality and flexibility, not picking fights, gendering child support, and being a "damn good" father. These strategies represent both practical and emotional responses to fathers' limited bargaining power in relation to childcare after separation in the Russian context. While fathers appeared to manage structural uncertainty relatively well and maintained a positive attitude towards their post-separation involvement, a closer examination of participants' narratives reveals the emotional toll of navigating co-parenting. The analysis demonstrates how fathers managed anxieties and frustrations associated with the precarity of their position as carers. In particular, it shows how fathers engaged in interpretive work to frame their continued involvement after separation as an individual responsibility, shifting the emphasis from structural constraints to their personal capacity to manage them.

Involved fatherhood occupies a prominent position in debates on gendered social policy because it is often seen as a mechanism for reshaping the historically unequal gender division of parental and household labour (Andreasson et al., 2023; Bjørnholt, 2014; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Goedecke & Klinth, 2021; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Morgan, 2002). Previous research has shown that fathers' engagement in hands-on childcare carries transformative potential, as it encourages men to reconsider their gender identities through practices traditionally marked as "feminine" (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Beglaubter, 2021; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Joshi, 2021). This study shows that, in Russia, fathers' attempts to sustain involvement were accompanied by the active gendering of their experiences. While participants challenged some gendered norms of parenthood, they also drew on more traditional forms of masculinity as sense-making resources. I argue that these resources provided stability and clarity amid the uncertainty and precarity of their fathering within institutional and legal frameworks that rendered their care invisible. In their narratives, fathers tended to emphasise agency, emotional self-control, and financial independence, even when they lacked institutional power in negotiations with their ex-partners. This study thus highlights that, without institutional support for alternative models of paternal masculinity, practices of involved fathering become embedded within more traditional gender arrangements, thereby losing their potential to induce broader gender transformations.

The question of whether Russia should follow other countries in introducing stronger legal and institutional support for shared physical custody should be considered with caution. Since Russian fathers cannot reclaim formal entitlements over their children, they have fewer institutionalised opportunities to weaponize care and involvement in custody disputes—an issue highlighted by feminist legal scholars and practitioners (Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Elizabeth et al., 2012; Fehlberg & Millward, 2014). Yet for those genuinely committed to co-parenting and co-caring, their marginal position made their caring invisible and unsupported. Introducing parental plans grounded in the ideal of cooperative parenting may therefore be a first step towards a greater recognition of paternal involvement in Russia.

This study has several limitations. The sample is small and focuses on a specific group of fathers who were significantly engaged in childcare after separation, which does not reflect the experiences of separated fathers more broadly. Moreover, mothers' perspectives on shared care were not included in this analysis. Understanding how mothers experience and negotiate shared parenting arrangements is essential for developing a more comprehensive picture of post-separation caregiving and for identifying policy responses that could better support both parents.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this issue, whose comments helped to strengthen the quality of the analysis and conceptual work presented in this article.

Funding

Publication of this article was supported by the Arts Graduate Research Publication Support Grant (University of Melbourne). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Melbourne and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that has been used in this article is not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used to improve grammar, clarity, and readability of the final version of the article.

References

Andreasson, J., & Johansson, T. (2019). Becoming a half-time parent: Fatherhood after divorce. *Journal of Family Studies*, *25*(1), 2–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2016.1195277

Andreasson, J., Tarrant, A., Johansson, T., & Ladlow, L. (2023). Perceptions of gender equality and engaged fatherhood among young fathers: Parenthood and the welfare state in Sweden and the UK. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *12*(3), 323–340. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16520100466479

Antokolskaia, M. (2020). Dissolution of marriage in westernized countries. In J. Eekelaar & R. George (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of family law and policy* (2nd ed., pp. 75–99). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058519-8

Beglaubter, J. (2021). "I feel like it's a little bit of a badge of honor": Fathers' leave-taking and the development of caring masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*, *24*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X19874869

Bezrukova, O. N., & Samoylova, V. A. (2020). Materinskii geitkiping v Rosii: Molodiye otsi o materiyah i barierah dostupnosti detei posle razvoda. *Monitoring of Public Opiniion: Ecomonic and Social Changes*, *3*, Article 3. https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.3.1680

Bjørnholt, M. (2014). Changing men, changing times—Fathers and sons from an experimental gender equality study. *The Sociological Review*, *62*(2), 295–315. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12156

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Bridgeman, J., Keating, H. M., & Lind, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Regulating family responsibilities* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315604503

Collier, R., & Sheldon, S. (2008). *Fragmenting fatherhood: A socio-legal study*. Hart Pub.

Collier, R., & Sheldon, S. (Eds.). (2006). *Fathers' rights activism and law reform in comparative perspective*. Hart Publishing.

Dermott, E., & Miller, T. (2015). More than the sum of its parts? Contemporary fatherhood policy, practice and discourse. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *4*(2), 183–195. http://doi.org/10.1332/204674315X14212269138324

Elizabeth, V., Gavey, N., & Tolmie, J. (2012). ". . . He's just swapped his fists for the system": The governance of gender through custody law. *Gender & Society*, *26*(2), 239–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211434765

Federal State Statistics Service. (2022). *Divorces*. https://rosstat.gov.ru/search?q=разводы

Fehlberg, B., & Millward, C. (2014). Family violence and financial outcomes after parental separation. In A. Hayes & D. Higgins (Eds.), *Families, policy and the law: Selected essays on contemporary issues for Australia* (pp. 235–243). Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Fehlberg, B., Smyth, B., Maclean, M., & Roberts, C. (2011). Legislating for shared time parenting after separation: A research review. *International Journal of Law, Policy & the Family*, *25*(3), 318–337. https://doi.org/10.1093/lawfam/ebr015

Flaquer, L. (2021). Shared parenting after separation and divorce in Europe in the context of the second demographic transition. In A.-M. Castrén, V. Česnuitytė, I. Crespi, J.-A. Gauthier, R. Gouveia, C. Martin, A. M. M. Mínguez, & K. Suwada (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of family sociology in Europe* (pp. 377–398). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73306-3_19

Goedecke, K., & Klinth, R. (2021). Selling Swedish fathers: On fatherhood, gender equality and Swedishness in strategic communication by the Swedish Institute, 1968–2015. *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *29*(4), 261–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1887931

Gregory, A., & Milner, S. (2008). Fatherhood regimes and father involvement in France and the UK. *Community, Work & Family*, *11*(1), 61–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800701419391

Heers, M., & Szalma, I. (2022). Gender role attitudes and father practices as predictors of nonresident father-child contact. *PLOS ONE*, *17*(4), Article 0266801. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266801

Ivanova, E. (2017). "Ya ne otnoshu sebya k khoroshim papam, v lutshem sluchae, k normal'nim": Kak rossiiskiye muzhchini konstruiruyut obraz "horoshego otsa posle razvoda. *Zhurnal Sotsiologii i Sotsialnoy Antropologii*, *20*(5), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.31119/jssa.2017.20.5.8

Ivanova, E. (2025). Moving beyond the narrative of marginalised fatherhood: Russian fathers' accounts of non-resident fathering after family separation. In J. P. Eerola, K. Twamley, H. Pirskanen, & P. M. Romero-Balsas (Eds.), *Caring fathers in the global context* (pp. 79–96). Policy Press.

Johansson, T., & Klinth, R. (2008). Caring fathers: The ideology of gender equality and masculine positions. *Men and Masculinities*, *11*(1), 42–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X06291899

Joshi, M. (2021). "I do not want to be a weekend papa": The demographic "crisis," active fatherhood, and emergent caring masculinities in Berlin. *Journal of Family Issues*, *42*(5), 883–907. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X21994154

Kay, R. (2007). Caring for men in contemporary Russia: Gendered constructions of need and hybrid forms of social security. *Focaal*, *2007*(50), 51–65. https://doi.org/10.3167/foc.2007.500105

Kravchenko, Z. (2012). Muzhchiny v zabote o detyah sravnitelnyy analiz rossii frantsii i norvegii. *Journal of Sociology and Social Antropology*, *15*(1), 65–85. https://www.jourssa.ru/index.php/jourssa/article/view/792?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Lipasova, A. (2017). Fatherhood in the Russian provinces: A theoretical and empirical analysis. *The Journal of Social Policy Studies*, *15*(4), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.17323/727-0634-2017-15-4-629-642

Moloney, L. (2009). 'Meaningful relationships' in the Family Law Act Amendments of 2006: A socio-legal perspective on fathers, mothers and the 'sharing' of parenting after separation. *Journal of Family Studies*, *15*(1), 9–19. https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.327.15.1.9

Morgan, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Making men into fathers: Men, masculinities and the social politics of fatherhood*. Cambridge University Press.

Natalier, K., & Hewitt, B. (2014). Separated parents reproducing and undoing gender through defining legitimate uses of child support. *Gender & Society*, *28*(6), 904–925. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214546933

Natalier, K., Cook, K., & McKenzie, H. (2019). Single mothers' post-separation provisioning: Child support and the governance of gender. *Sociology*, *53*(3), 554–570. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518813847

Parkinson, P. (2011). *Family law and the indissolubility of parenthood*. Cambridge University Press.

Philip, G. (2013). Relationality and moral reasoning in accounts of fathering after separation or divorce: Care, gender and working at "fairness." *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *2*(3), 409–424. https://doi.org/10.1332/204674313X667407

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.

Rotkirch, A., Temkina, A., & Zdravomyslova, E. (2007). Who helps the degraded housewife? Comments on Vladimir Putin's demographic speech. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *14*(4), 349–357. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506807081884

Rzhanitsyna, L., & Kalabikhina, I. (2012). *Alimenti v Rossii: Analiz problem i strategiya v interesah rebenka*. Institute of Sociology of Russian Academy of Science.

Shwalb, D. W., Shwalb, B. J., & Lamb, M. E. (2013). *Fathers in cultural context: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/detail.action?docID=1024714

Szalma, I. (2020). Contact between non-resident parents and their children during the Covid-19 in Hungary. *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *11*(2), 157–161. https://doi.org/10.14267/CJSSP.2020.2.12

Utrata, J. (2008). Keeping the bar low: Why Russia's nonresident fathers accept narrow fatherhood ideals. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *70*(5), Article 1297. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/17413737

Utrata, J. (2015). *Women without men: Single mothers and family change in the new Russia* (1st ed.). Cornell University Press.

Utrata, J., Ispa, D. M., & Ispa-Landa, S. (2013). Men on the margins of family life. In D. W. Shwalb, B. J. Shwalb, & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Fathers in cultural context: Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 279–302). Taylor & Francis Group.

About the Author



Ekaterina Ivanova is a sociologist specialising in qualitative and cross-cultural research on families, gender, and health. Ekaterina holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne and currently works as a Research Officer at the Nossal Institute for Global Health on a project examining the effects of climate change on human health in Kyrgyzstan.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10886
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10886

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Framing Fatherhood: Legal Norms and Media Narratives in Croatia

Brigita Miloš [1], **Ivana Tutić Grokša** [2], **and Nadja Čekolj** [1]

[1] Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, Croatia
[2] Department for EU Projects, Adult Education Institution Dante, Croatia

Correspondence: Nadja Čekolj (nadja.cekolj@uniri.hr)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 17 November 2025 **Published:** 21 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2. Media as Indicators of Shifts in Parental Roles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Methodology

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

2.1. Legal Analysis

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

1. How are parental figures, particularly fathers, mentioned and represented in Croatian legal acts?

2. What legal rights and responsibilities are assigned to fathers in the context of childcare?

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

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

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

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

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

2.2. Analysis of Media Portrayals

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

1. Do media portrayals of fatherhood support the efforts of legislation to model the "new fatherhood"?

2. Are media portrayals of paternity leave consistent with the cultural logic of the "new fatherhood"?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Results

3.1. Father(hood) in Croatian Legal Acts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2.1. Fatherhood Between Exception and Deviation

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

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

3.2.2. Famous Fatherhood as an Emotional Platform

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2.3. Reproduction of Patriarchal Models

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

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

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

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

3.2.4. Media Fatherhood as a Stylised, Affective Product

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

3.2.5. Asymmetry Between the Sexes and Coded Moral Concepts

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

3.2.6. Emotional Capital of Caring Fatherhood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Representations of Paternity Leave

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

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

3.3.1. Political Framing

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

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

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

3.3.2. Discursive Normalisation

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

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

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

3.3.3. Visibility and Agency

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

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

They negotiate with employers:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4.1. The Resilience of Traditional Paternity Scripts

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

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

3.4.2. The Ambivalence of Celebrity Fatherhood

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

3.4.3. Institutional Appeals to the "New Fatherhood"

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

3.4.4. Fatherhood Between Spectacle and Governance

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

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

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

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

4. Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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

Supplementary Material

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

References

Alejandro, A., & Zhao, L. (2023). Multi-method qualitative text and discourse analysis: A methodological framework. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *30*(6), 461–473. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231184421

André, S., Cammu, N., & Meuleman, E. (2025). Fathers, families, and society: A Two-decade systematic literature review on the contexts and consequences of paternity and parental leave for fathers. *Social Sciences*, *14*(3), Article 168. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14030168

B.a.B.e., & UNIZD. (2022, July). *Ispitivanje javnog mnijenja i potreba roditelja maloljetne djece: Istraživački izvještaj*. https://babe.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Istrazivacki-izvjestaj.pdf

Calvert, S. L., & Wilson, B. J. (2009). *The handbook of children, media, and development*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, *19*(6), 829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Čulić, L. (2019). *Elementi promijenjenog očinstva u svakodnevici očeva u Hrvatskoj* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Zadar.

Derado, A., Petrić, M., & Tomić-Koludrović, I. (2020). Relational gender strategies in the division of household labour. *Revija za sociologiju*, *50*(3), 321–351. https://doi.org/10.5613/rzs.50.3.1

DZS. (2024, December 31). *Rezultati ankete o raspolaganju vremenom (ZUDP-2024-1-3)* [Statistical release]. https://podaci.dzs.hr/2024/hr/77494

Elliott, K. (2016). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *19*(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Family Act. (2023). *Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia*, 103/15, 98/19, 47/20, 49/23, 156/23. https://www.zakon.hr/z/88/obiteljski-zakon

Fox, E., Pascall, G., & Warren, T. (2009). Work–family policies, participation, and practices: Fathers and childcare in Europe. *Community, Work & Family*, *12*(3), 313–326. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800902966323

Gašljević, I. (2020). *(Ne)egalitarističko konstruiranje uloge oca na portalima namijenjenim roditeljima* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:611956

Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press.

Glatz, T., Alsarve, J., Daneback, K., & Sorbring, E. (2023). An examination of parents' online activities and links to demographic characteristics among parents in Sweden. *Journal of Family Social Work*, *26*(1), 45–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2023.2197958

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). Routledge.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.

Huerta, M. C., Adema, W., Baxter, J., Han, W.-J., Lausten, M., Lee, R., & Waldfogel, J. (2013). *Fathers' leave, fathers' involvement and child development: Are they related? Evidence from four OECD countries* (Working Paper No. 140). OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/5k4dlw9w6czq-en

Klasnić, K. (2017). *Utjecaj rodne podjele obiteljskih obveza i kućanskih poslova na profesionalni život zaposlenih žena*. Pravobranitelj/ica za ravnopravnost spolova Republike Hrvatske.

Klasnić, K., & Kunac, S. (2024). *Rodne nejednakosti nevidljivog rada—pregled istraživanja rutinskih, povremenih i mentalnih kućanskih poslova od 1998. do danas*. Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo.

Končevski, L. (2019). *Kulturna povijest žena u Hrvatskoj od 1945. do 1989*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Croatian Studies. https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:111:677017

Lewis, J. (1992). Gender and the development of welfare regimes. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *2*(3), 159–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/095892879200200301

Livingstone, S., & Lunt, P. (2001). *Talk on television: Audience participation and public debate*. Routledge.

Martín-García, T., Seiz, M., & Castro-Martín, T. (2023). Ideals and norms related to fatherhood in Europe: A comparative perspective from the European Social Survey. *Journal of Family Research*, *35*, 17–36. https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-795

Martins, N., & Harrison, K. (2012). Racial and gender differences in the relationship between children's television use and self-esteem: A longitudinal panel study. *Communication Research*, *39*(3), 338–357.

Maternity and Parental Benefits Act. (2025). *Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia*, 152/22, 34/25. https://www.zakon.hr/z/214/zakon-o-rodiljnim-i-roditeljskim-potporama

Miljević-Riđički, R. (2022). Suvremeni oblici očinstva—značaj za dječji razvoj. *Ljetopis socijalnog rada*, *29*(2), 247–264. https://doi.org/10.3935/ljsr.v29i2.384

O'Brien, M., & Wall, K. (Eds.). (2017). *Comparative perspectives on work–life balance and gender equality: Fathers on leave alone*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0

Orloff, A. S. (1993). Gender and the social rights of citizenship: The comparative analysis of gender relations and welfare states. *American Sociological Review*, *58*(3), 303–328. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095903

Pahić, T., & Miljević-Riđički, R. (2014). The portrait of mothers and fathers in Croatian newspapers and in magazine for parents: Today and twenty years ago. *Croatian Journal of Education*, *16*(2), 93–107.

Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova. (2024). *Izvješće o radu Pravobraniteljice za ravnopravnost spolova za 2023. godinu*. https://www.prs.hr/application/uploads/Izvješće_o_radu_Pravobraniteljic.pdf

Reuters Institute. (2024). *Digital news report 2024: Croatia*. University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/croatia

Sokolić, M. (2021). Uključenost očeva u odgoj predškolske djece [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education.

Tomić, L. (2023). *Obrasci tranzicije u očinstvo* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Rijeka, Faculty of Teacher Education.

Varga, M. (2021). Fathers on leave: Experiences of middle-class fathers on parental leave in the city of Zagreb. *The Croatian Journal of Social Policy*, *28*(3), 391–413. https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v28i3.1807

Vučković Juroš, T. (2015). Socijalna isključenost seksualnih manjina u Hrvatskoj. *The Croatian Journal of Social Policy*, *22*(2), 195–217. https://doi.org/10.3935/rsp.v22i2.1255

About the Authors

Brigita Miloš works at the Department of Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka. Her research focuses on feminism, gender studies, body studies, and philology. She is a member of the Centre for Women's Studies in Rijeka.

Ivana Tutić Grokša is a social worker and researcher whose work focuses on the well-being of minority groups, especially sexual and gender minorities. She works on EU projects at the Adult Education Institution Dante and is a member of the Centre for Women's Studies in Rijeka. Her experience bridges social work, research, and education.

Nadja Čekolj works in the Department of Education at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka. She is also the coordinator of the Centre for Women's Studies at the same faculty. Her research interests include feminism, gender studies, citizenship education, and volunteering.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11105
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.11105

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Involved Fatherhood as Interpreted by Czech Men's Organizations

Steven Saxonberg [1,2] **and Lenka Formanková** [3]

[1] Department of Sociology, Södertörn University, Sweden
[2] Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Masaryk University, Czechia
[3] Department of Social Work, Charles University, Czech Republic

Correspondence: Steven Saxonberg (steven.saxonberg@sh.se)

Submitted: 5 August 2025 **Accepted:** 22 December 2025 **Published:** 28 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

Drawing on the discourse on masculinities, this article explores the positions of Czech men's organizations related to childcare. Recently, there has been growing attention to the idea of involved fatherhood; we show that one Czech men's organization has indeed developed a caring masculinity that aligns well with the notion of involved fatherhood. The other organizations, by contrast, have expressed strong anti-feminist sentiments, blaming women and female-dominated professions for their losses in divorce cases. While these groups initially emerged to demand equal custody post-divorce—appearing to endorse gender equality—they claim to support the "traditional family," where the man is the head of the household. Although these views seem to be contradictory, we argue they are in line with the pre-modern view of masculinity in which the family (wife and children) was the property of the man; therefore, it was no contradiction for the father to expect the mother to be the main carer before a divorce, while demanding custody rights after a divorce.

Keywords

caring masculinity; childcare; involved fatherhood; paternal care; pre-modern masculinity; shared custody

1. Introduction

In this article, we analyze the types of masculinities we find among Czech men's organizations. The Czech case is interesting because it allows us to explore how men's organizations promote caring where the institutional, cultural, and historical contexts differ from the Western European and Anglo-Saxon cases that dominate the literature. In Central Europe, the policy regimes and cultural norms shape the possibilities for gender-egalitarian parenting differently than in the Western context. By integrating these perspectives, we

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

aim to advance a more nuanced understanding of fatherhood as a social location where masculinities are not only renegotiated but also contested, exposing the ambivalent potential of care to both challenge and sustain existing gendered power relations.

Our starting point is the discourse on masculinities. We argue that in Czechia, one organization—the Liga otevřených mužů (League of Open Men; LOM)—has developed a rather mainstream type of "caring masculinity" (Elliott, 2016, 2020; Hanlon, 2012; Jordan, 2020). By contrast, other men's organizations have adopted a type of masculinity after losing their custody cases, which we label "pre-modern" (cf. Eisenbichler & Murray, 2024; Saxonberg, 2019). They have been aggressive and anti-feminist, and blame women for both their divorces and court decisions (given that judges, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers were often women). They see the man as the head of the household, although women should be responsible for the household chores. Yet, they also believe that after a divorce, the father should have the right to have at least joint custody of the child. It might seem like they hold contradictory views that combine a conservative type of masculinity with a caring masculinity, but we show their views are not contradictory if seen through the lens of pre-modern masculinity values, in which the family (including wife and children) is property of the man. This article contributes to the international discourse by showing how masculinities can develop differently in different settings. In addition, we introduce a new term—"pre-modern masculinity"—which we believe can be applied to other cases in other countries.

This article proceeds by discussing theories of masculinity and how they apply to the Czech case. Then, after introducing our methodology, we analyze the concrete cases of the different men's organizations in Czechia, including both the relatively pro-feminist LOM that portrays a rather caring masculinity and the more conservative men's organizations that promote a more pre-modern masculinity.

2. Involved Fatherhood and Caring Masculinities

We begin this section by discussing what previous studies have shown on the effects of involved fatherhood, which is closely related to caring masculinity. We claim that one of the men's organizations in Czechia displays a caring masculinity, while the others display more of what we label a "pre-modern" masculinity. Thus, we proceed by describing some of the positive effects of involved fatherhood according to the literature. Then we summarize the discourse on caring masculinities, after which we develop our notion of pre-modern marginal masculinity, which we argue is the dominating type of masculinity among Czech men's groups.

2.1. The Effects of Involved Fatherhood

Not only does involved fatherhood contribute to gender equality and the elimination of gender roles, paternal engagement also has positive effects on child development. Grau Grau et al. (2022) summarize evidence demonstrating that involved fathers significantly enhance children's cognitive development, emotional regulation, and educational attainment. Paternal involvement has been linked to improved academic performance, reduced behavioral problems, and heightened emotional intelligence (Yogman & Eppel, 2022), as well as increased partnership stability within families (Petts et al., 2020). Beyond early childhood, engaged fatherhood contributes to long-term psychosocial outcomes, with adolescents of actively involved fathers reporting higher self-esteem and stronger peer relationships (Grau Grau et al., 2022).

In the Nordic context, these practices are deeply intertwined with cultural narratives of gender equality. Bach (2017) illustrates how Danish fathers in dual-career households construct paternal identities through narratives of choice, involved fatherhood, and gender equality, simultaneously challenging yet subtly preserving traditional masculine ideals. This underscores the complexity of contemporary fathering roles, which are both culturally situated and individually negotiated. The developmental value of paternal engagement is particularly pronounced when caregiving responsibilities are equitably shared with mothers, providing children with diverse role models and caregiving approaches. Thus, fatherhood is increasingly framed not as supplementary but as integral to holistic child development.

Despite these documented benefits, significant barriers limit fathers' ability to participate fully in caregiving. Parental leave benefits are often too low to encourage fathers to share the leave time, because they often have higher salaries than mothers, so the family's loss of income would be great. Studies show that a combination of father quotas as well as generous benefits based on the income-replacement principle is needed to encourage fathers to share in parental leave time (e.g., Saxonberg, 2013). Atkinson (2025) identifies workplace culture and the persistence of the ideal worker norm—which equates professional success with long hours and uninterrupted availability—as further obstacles.

Cultural norms further constrain paternal engagement. Saxonberg (2014) describes the "norm of threeness" in Central Europe, which expects mothers to remain home full-time until their child turns three. While one-third of Czech and Slovak fathers expressed willingness to share leave, entrenched gender expectations and maternal distrust of paternal caregiving hindered this aspiration, as did a parental leave system in the Czech Republic that discouraged fathers from sharing in the leave time because the benefit levels are low and not based on the income replacement principle.

Father involvement is not only important when heterosexual parents are living together, raising their children, and going on parental leave; it is also important after divorces or separations. Studies of shared custody after divorce also usually conclude that children are better off under shared custody arrangements (for a summary of the many studies on the topic, see, for example, Fučík & Šolcová, 2022). Meta-analytic reviews have concluded, for example, that children living under joint custody were better adjusted than those living with one parent (e.g., Baude et al., 2016) and have higher levels of well-being (e.g., Steinbach, 2019). This is especially relevant for studying men's organizations because, at least in Czechia, most of these organizations were founded specifically to promote shared custody after divorces.

Even though involved fatherhood has positive influences on child well-being and gender equality, simply being more "involved" is not enough, and it still implies the idea that involvement is a choice that fathers have (while women cannot choose to be non-involved). As Bach (2017) argues, the invocation of "choice" and "involved fatherhood" serves as a discursive strategy for reconciling domestic labor participation with the maintenance of masculine identity, ultimately limiting the transformative potential of their caregiving roles. This shift toward involved fatherhood has also led to the development of the notion of caring masculinity as a manner in which fathers learn to incorporate caring into their masculine ideals.

2.2. Caring Masculinities

This growing concern with the issue of involved fathers coincides with the caring masculinity framework. Emerging at the intersection of critical studies on men and masculinities and feminist theory, this framework offers conceptual and practical tools for reimagining care within the context of gender relations. Building on Connell's (1995) theorization of hegemonic masculinity, scholars of caring masculinities argue that men's engagement in care work—whether in familial, professional, or community contexts—can unsettle patriarchal norms and foster gender equality (Elliott, 2016, 2020). This framework responds to a critical gap that Ruby and Scholz (2018) identified, as they note that "in contrast to feminist theory, theories of masculinity barely reflect on care and care work" (p. 73). Crucially, as Elliott (2016) emphasizes, caring masculinities must not be reduced to individual choice or framed as innate dispositions. By integrating care into masculinity studies, scholars such as Elliott (2020) define caring masculinities as identities that reject domination and patriarchal traits while incorporating ideals of interdependence, relationality, and positive emotion. This reconceptualization aligns with feminist theorists of caring (e.g., Tronto, 1993), who view care as a relational and ethical practice rather than a privatized, feminized duty. Importantly, caring masculinities are not presented as a homogenizing or idealized typology of the "new man" but as a diverse, context-dependent set of practices that can coexist with, contest, or transform dominant masculinities (Elliott, 2016). This body of work is inherently transnational, reflecting varied cultural, economic, and political conditions under which caring masculinities are enacted. Policy-driven interventions can encourage men's participation in care as part of broader gender equality strategies (Scambor et al., 2014).

A critical insight emerging from this literature is that caring masculinities require men to sacrifice privileges and power afforded by hegemonic masculinity, often at the cost of social status or facing stigmatization (Hanlon, 2012). As Hanlon argues, this rejection of domination constitutes a form of "heroic" resistance that itself requires emotional labor (p. 209).

Jordan (2020) shows in her study that even when men take on a more involved, caring role, they do not see caring as something feminine, but rather incorporate it into their view of masculinity. Similarly, Wojnicka and de Boise (2025, p. 351) state that what is frequently labeled as caring masculinity does not necessarily represent a fundamental overhaul of unequal distributions of labour but rather an incorporation of certain caring practices as a response to the crisis of legitimacy posed by demands for change.

Since most of the men's organizations in this study revolve around child custody issues, the issue arises as to how post-divorce/separation experiences influence caring masculinity. Even though little research exists on this issue, Graf and Wojnicka's (2023) study of shared custody cases in Germany and Sweden shows that when lone fathers take care of their children for extended periods, it increases their potential of developing a caring masculinity. Nonetheless, they caution that the experiences of these fathers do not necessarily lead to support for gender equality and instead can lead to a "protective masculinity" by which they see themselves as the protectors of women and children, who are forced to take care of children under certain circumstances.

In our study, we show that the men's groups that organize around child custody issues are strongly anti-feminist and do not espouse caring masculinities, while the one organization (LOM) that supports a caring masculinity does not engage in child custody issues.

2.3. Backlash and Pre-modern Masculinity in Czechia

While some men have taken on a more caring masculinity and in Czechia, one group actually promotes it, most men's groups in the country belong to the "backlash" category, in that they oppose what they perceive to be society's move toward greater gender equality. Jordan (2016, p. 21, 2019, p. 41) claims that backlash comes from people in power, who oppose these changes. Backlash adherents oppose feminism and either see gender equality as an undesirable goal or they believe that feminism works against gender equality by favoring women over men. However, the Czech men's movement is not very powerful and actually rather marginalized because of its generally misogynist views (Saxonberg, 2017). Thus, in contrast to LOM, it does not sit on any government committees, nor can it cooperate with women's groups.

Similar to the Ukrainian conservative parental movement (Strelnyk, 2017), it does at times try to cooperate with other conservative groups, but its cooperation is much more limited. Karzabi (2017) considers these Czech men's organizations to be "fathers' rights" groups who are openly antifeminist and claims that such groups do not exist in Ukraine, as the Ukrainian groups are more positive toward gender equality. While the Czech men's organizations generally share the anti-feminist views of their conservative Polish counterparts (i.e., the ones that Korolczuk & Hryciuk, 2017, label "angry fathers" and "fathers' advocates"), the Czech groups emphasize Christianity and religion more than the Polish groups, despite the fact that Czechia is a more secular country than Poland. Analogous to the fathers' rights groups that Jordan (2020) interviewed in the UK, the conservative Czech organizations do not see caring as something feminine. A difference between the Czech and British backlash organizations is that Jordan (2016, p. 22) claims that "backlash is, by definition, parasitic on feminism and only becomes necessary when feminism is strong, rather than declining," but in Czechia, the feminist movement has been rather weak (e.g., Saxonberg, 2014).

Even though the men's groups—with the exception of LOM—are conservative, their views differ from the norm of threeness (Saxonberg, 2014) that is hegemonic in Czechia, in which the mother should work full-time until having children and then stay at home with the children until they reach the age of three and then go back to work full-time. Similar to the male-breadwinner model, these conservative men activists generally think that the man should be the main breadwinner and should be the head of the household. They also think that when the couple is still married, the mother should be the one responsible for the household. However, they also believe that when they get divorced, they should at least get joint custody of the children (known as "alternating custody" in Czechia; see Saxonberg, 2017).

While some scholars have considered this to be a contradictory view that combines a patriarchal masculinity with a caring masculinity (e.g., Korolczuk & Hryciuk, 2017), we see it as actually being consistent with a type of masculinity that existed in pre-modern times, before women got the right to vote. Similar to Saxonberg (2019), we consider the "pre-modern" period to be roughly similar to the period of the Spanish Inquisition, which lasted from the late 15th century to the mid-19th century. As Murray (2024) notes, it is difficult to draw the line between medieval and early modern, which is why historians often use the term "pre-modern."

Even though Eisenbichler and Murray (2024) also use the term "pre-modern masculinity," they do not define it, and instead, their anthology simply collects essays about various aspects of pre-modern masculinity, such as whether or not men should wear beards. Thus, their anthology does not provide a framework for us; instead, we must develop our own, which we do below. We prefer the term pre-modern masculinity over, for example,

Wojnicka's (2016) notion of "masculist groups," as our term shows a certain historical continuity of a particular type of belief system, and "masculist" is vaguer and could even cover fathers who are not interested in child custody after divorces.

Of course, any category must be a simplification, and there were differences over time and between countries, but a general principle from this period is the idea that men should have power over women and children and that the family was the property of the man (Chojnacki, 1994). Thus, women were subjugated to men (Newman, 2024). As de Beauvoir (1949/1956, p. 173) writes, under the Napoleonic codes, the man had "many more rights over the children than the mother," and "the wife is the property of the man to whom she provides children" (p. 155). Given this view, then it is no contradiction for men to believe that they should be the head of the household and the main breadwinner, while also advocating custody—or at least shared custody—of their children after getting divorced. Therefore, they could be responsible for their children after divorce without developing a caring masculinity.

Writing about the role that men were expected to play in England in the 18th century, Bailey (2007, pp. 219–220) comments:

> In order to be fully rounded examples of manhood, early-modern men needed to be married and, importantly, to be "good" husbands and fathers. While respect and affection for wives was advocated in advice literature, much emphasis was placed on discipline and material provision. The primary role of the father in a patriarchal society was as the centre of authority, organising the education, training and discipline of children over the age of seven. Society and the law also demanded that men adequately maintain their wives and children.

Our study shows that the Czech men activists seem to have believed that they basically fulfilled this role until their wives filed for divorce and deprived them of their status. Note that we are not claiming that it was always the wives who actually filed for divorce, but the activists almost always put the full blame on their former wives.

In a situation in which the family was the property of the father, it was common in Europe for fathers to receive custody after a divorce. Folberg and Graham (1979, p. 530) note that in pre-industrial England, "the common law regarded children as their father's property. The presumption that the father was "the person entitled by law to the custody of his child was irrefutable." Some fathers even saw this as a burden. Thus, one father in England complained to his wife during a divorce hearing: "You have nobody to maintain or provide for, but your self; I must maintain & give portions to my Son & Daughter" (Tague, 2007, p. 200).

Guilt also mattered: If the court decided it was one parent's fault that the couple was getting a divorce, then the other parent would get custody (Griesebner & Hehenberger, 2023). But even in this case, as already noted, the Czech men's activists almost always claim it was the wife's fault. Connecting guilt to custody was also common in such countries as Spain (Jauregi, 2023), the German lands (Fleßenkämper, 2023), and the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Lanczová, 2017).

Even if it was more usual to give fathers custody, they had to be able to show they were able to provide for their children as part of their breadwinner role. Thus, in one case in Prague, the mother gained custody

because she successfully argued that her ex-husband was an alcoholic, who was unable to provide for the upbringing of their children (Čevelová & Reich, 2023, p. 121).

Seen from this perspective, even if the men's activists were requesting shared/alternating custody rather than full custody, their ability to combine conservative views toward gender relations with the desire to have at least shared custody is not a contradiction. The Czech men's movement shows that in a certain context, the argument for shared custody could be rather an argument for going back to pre-industrial gender relations rather than a desire to support involved fatherhood, eliminate gender roles, and support a caring masculinity.

Below we argue that—with the exception of LOM (which displays a caring masculinity)—the Czech men's organizations embrace a pre-modern type of masculinity, in which the family should be under the control of the father, so that the father should also get at least shared custody after divorces, even though fathers should not need to also share in the child-raising duties before a divorce.

3. Methodology

We conducted a qualitative thematic content analysis of Czech men's organizations active in the public debate on fatherhood and gender relations in 2025. We use it in the sense of identifying patterns in the text that combine to have some kind of meaning (Neuendorf, 2018). The idea is to see which basic themes emerge (Jaspal, 2020). In our case, for the conservative men's groups, the main themes were the traditional family, child custody, and anti-feminism, while for LOM the main themes were involved fatherhood, harmonization of work and family life, and opposition to violence toward women and children.

The analysis focused on materials published on organizational webpages, blogs, and Facebook discussion forums. We chose all the men's organizations that we could find that had been active in the previous decade and the current one. Our starting point was the groups mentioned in previous studies (Saxonberg, 2017; Fafejta, 2018), as well as searching the web pages (via Google) and searching newspaper articles (via the Newton database). Thus, we investigated all the known men's groups. In conducting our analysis, we searched for all the phrases dealing with caring, fatherhood, childcare, shared custody, divorce, family, and gender.

Our sample includes organizations and opinion platforms representing diverse ideological orientations. Only LOM and the Unie otců (Union of Fathers) were active. The other previously important men's advocacy groups, Aliance pro rodiče a děti (The Alliance for Parents and Children), Český svaz mužů (the Czech Union of Men), and Spravedlnost dětem (Justice for Children), were no longer active in 2025. In our analysis of the posts, we examined stridavka.cz and K213.cz, which serve as key online platforms for men's and fathers' rights activists, though neither is formally registered as an organization. Stridavka.cz provides a platform for its founder and prominent figure in the Czech fathers' rights movement, Aleš Hodina, while K213 features the views of Jiří Fiala, who established the site in 2004 as an advocacy space related to his own custody dispute following divorce.

Among the actors analyzed, only LOM consistently promotes discourses aligned with "caring masculinities" and "involved fatherhood," whereas the remaining organizations predominantly articulate more traditional, conservative, or anti-feminist positions. There is another organization focusing on the rights of fathers, called

PROUD, but this organization encompasses parenting rights of the LGBTQ+ community, so it is not solely a male organization. For this reason, we have not included them in the analysis.

Altogether, we originally identified over 100 texts, including Facebook posts, public statements, and discussion threads, selected for their relevance to the themes of fatherhood (*otec*, *otce*, *otců*, *otcem*) and shared custody (*střídavá péče*, *střídavé péče*, *střídavou péči*), published between 2010 and 2025. The online materials were identified both manually by the authors with the assistance of AI tools (ChatGPT-5.0) to enhance search efficiency (we searched for father/hood, shared custody, and we also looked specifically at Covid). We focused on original texts created for the online media, not reposted documents and articles. At the last stage, we have selected 27 texts for our analysis, which included both fatherhood and shared custody, focusing on personal experiences and on evaluative opinions and statements (e.g., in the case of webpage *Střídavka*, the sections "Your Experiences" (*Vaše zkušenosti*) and "Opinions and Commentaries" (*Úvahy a komentáře*). The data were coded thematically using an inductive approach to identify dominant narratives and ideological framings. The findings are presented primarily through thematic content analysis, which we found most suitable for capturing recurrent frames and value positions across organizations. Our main objective was to understand the diversity of interpretations of "involved fatherhood" within the online spaces maintained by these organizations and platforms.

Since we rely on publicly available online sources, no ethical issues arise concerning consent. Consent would be an issue if we had conducted interviews.

3.1. Limits of Our Study

Our analysis is based on publicly available online published documents on organizational websites and social media platforms rather than on original interview data. Consequently, the selection of analyzed texts is necessarily constrained. We do not claim that this online content reflects the full diversity of voices and opinions within the men's organizations; rather, it represents only those positions that are publicly communicated and curated by organizational gatekeepers who manage these platforms. Also, we look at the content mostly published in recent years and so we do not show all the possible narratives which appeared over decades since the organizations were founded; however, this was not our aim.

AI-assisted sampling helped to systematically identify and screen a large volume of online texts; nonetheless, it also constitutes a potential limitation. AI-based tools may privilege more visible, frequently referenced, or algorithmically salient content. Although the final selection and coding decisions were made by the research team, the initial AI-supported filtering may have shaped the boundaries of the dataset. Thematic analysis was considered an appropriate method for identifying the dominant themes resonating within the movement based on this type of material.

Combining online content analysis with in-depth interviews would strengthen the findings. We contacted the key representatives of the main organizations, but except for LOM, we were unable to secure interviews. A possible reason why many activists refused to participate could be because they know who we are and perceive us to be feminist researchers who do not sympathize with their views. This dynamic itself points to the polarized nature of the field and may be analytically relevant. Given this limited access, we decided to rely exclusively on data that was equally available for all the relevant actors to avoid excessive heterogeneity in data sources.

Finally, this study focuses on a single national context, so future research would benefit from cross-national comparisons to examine whether similar themes emerge in different national settings. However, we have compared our findings to similar studies from other countries to increase the validity of our findings.

4. Results

In recent decades, the conservative men's organizations paradoxically weakened as they lost their main agenda—shared custody—and with it, their means to express anger and frustration publicly. This shift began in 2010, when the Czech Constitutional Court supported alternating custody as a human right (ruling no. 1206/09). In 2014, it declared shared custody the preferred practice (Forejtová & Grygerová, 2016). Currently, new legislation from 2025 recognizes both parents as equal in their rights to care, so custody arrangements are based on mutual negotiation between parents and the child. With their primary objective—joint custody—achieved, the conservative men's organizations have either disbanded or shifted to a broader conservative agenda with a strong antifeminist stance, which we discuss below after first discussing the group that espouses a caring masculinity.

4.1. Caring Masculinity

Initially an informal self-help group for fathers, LOM has become a professional organization to support men's involvement in relationships with their sons and has never had shared custody as its agenda. Instead, they focus on broader male engagement in caregiving, often collaborating with pro-women and feminist organizations. It has actively tried to encourage involved fatherhood and a caring masculinity. It is the only men's organization in Czechia that has good relations with women's organizations and that actively cooperates with them. In fact, of its current 16 employees, 10 are women. It supports gender equality and, consequently, is the only men's organization that became a member of the Czech Government Council for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Examples of its cooperation with women's organizations include engaging in activities with the Gender Studies Center. They also joined the campaign Bílá stužka: Muži proti násilí na ženách a dětech ("The White Ribbon Campaign: Men Against Violence Against Women and Children"). In addition, they have worked on common projects with other mother and family organizations, such as the Mother Center Network (mateřská centra) and the Union of Family and Community Centers (Unie pro rodinu a komunitu). It is also part of international networks like MenEngage and Ressurssenter for Men (Saxonberg, 2017; see also: https://ilom.cz).

As part of their effort to promote involved fatherhood and a caring masculinity, they promote such issues as the harmonization of work and family, the presence of the father during childbirth, etc. They also organize vacations for fathers with their children, as it started out as an organization promoting the active engagement of fathers in care through common weekends and vacations with their children. Furthermore, they have also run campaigns supporting fathers' care for children (e.g., the Táta dneska frčí campaign). LOM supports involved fatherhood by encouraging fathers to share the parental leave time and promoting involvement in care since the prenatal age, as is obvious on the part of the LOM webpage, the title of which translates to "The Father Website" (https://tataweb.cz). For example, on their Facebook page, on May 31, 2023, they write: "We try to motivate employers to actively support fatherhood. In addition to a series of courses for active dads, we have also prepared a handbook, an outdoor workshop for fathers and children and a management course" (LOM, 2023).

4.2. Backlash of Pre-Modern Family Arrangements

Except for LOM, the men's organizations support conservative family values, despite their demand for joint custody, which might seem to be a feminist stance. Unie otců, stridavka.cz, and K213 emerged in Czechia as advocacy groups for fathers, centering their efforts on securing shared custody in the context of divorce and family disputes. The members of these organizations are often conservative and economically secure men who experienced divorce as a loss of social status—home, family identity, and fatherhood—leading to expressions of anger and grievance (Saxonberg, 2017). Their activism intensified in the 2000s, marked by public protests, petitions, hunger strikes, and blockades of public institutions, framing fathers as victims of biased legal and social systems. This confrontational approach reflected their defensive stance toward women's organizations and state institutions, situating them in what Jordan (2019) defines as "backlash" men's groups.

4.2.1. Support for Shared Custody

Men's participation in care is seen as the main aspect of caring masculinities. Post-divorce caregiving can foster caring masculinities under certain conditions—but the Czech case shows how it can also be mobilized within non-egalitarian frameworks. Shared custody (*střídavá péče*) is central to these groups' advocacy and is often framed as the ultimate solution for improving children's well-being after the divorce of parents. This can be seen by the fact that the most popular discussion forum is stridavka.cz, which can be translated to "shared custody.cz." The organization K213 described shared custody as "the only effective means of improving the situation of children" (Kluzák, 2011). Its founder, Jiří Fiala, started this platform in 2004 as an advocacy space for his own custody battle for his children after his divorce.

Unie otců repeatedly posts on its webpage claims that shared custody arrangements are in the best interest of children and that having both parents is their right. In the section titled "Information" (*Infomace*), calling for a protest in front of the Highest Court in Brno in October 2022, the petition states:

> Children have the right to both parents! We remind the victims of the judicial malice of custody courts and OSPOD [the Social and Legal Protection of Children Authority]. The actions and inactions of courts and authorities for social and legal protection of children often lead to serious disruption or destruction of the relationship between parent and child, tolerance of national and cross-border abductions, as well as harm to the health of children and parents resulting in death (suicides of minors and adults), self-harm… (Unie otců, 2022)

In the pre-modern model, fathers often received full custody of their children after divorce since the family, including the children, was seen as the father's property. Thus, even if the mother had been the main person responsible for raising the children, the father still got custody after a divorce. In the more recent situation in Czechia, in which the courts almost automatically gave full custody to the mothers, such a demand would be unrealistic even for the most radical men's activists, so shared custody represented a preferable alternative to no custody. Nonetheless, some activists indicate that fathers are actually better carers than mothers. For example, in a discussion on stridavka.cz, on May 28, 2010, at 10:44 pm, a user by the name of Doctor writes: "My daughter is fixated on me and cries repeatedly when her maternal grandmother picks her up. Her mother spends most of her time at work and does not spend enough time with her." Similarly, Petr, on September 6, 2010, at 19:55 pm, maintains that he is a better carer than his wife, whom he is leaving,

claiming that his wife turned her back on him and the children and only lives for herself. He adds he would like to demand full custody of the children, but he does not think it is possible to get it, given how the Czech legal system operates.

During the Covid pandemic, shared custody arrangements were limited due to quarantine measures. There were several posts discussing the practice of cross-border care arrangements, as well as articles focusing on children's vaccination and fathers' participation at birth on stridavka.cz. What is not addressed in these sources, however, is any shift in opinions regarding fathers' involvement during the pandemic (being victims of the system and mothers). However, in some cases, fathers claimed that the pandemic measures were used against them in their attempt to exercise their custody rights. A comment from April 29, 2020, reads: "The mother repeatedly refused to hand over the daughter to the father because of the pandemic. Police patrol changed nothing. Father found no support from the court either" (Kozelka, 2020).

In such cases, fathers were effectively cut off from any meaningful contact with their children. Even in situations where contact was maintained, it occurred under extremely restricted conditions, as exposed in a comment from February 4, 2021: "The entire visit…we spent most of the time in the car. I'd say fathers have it tough." Aleš Hodina argues that fathers lacked appropriate spaces to meet their children due to quarantine measures: "The situation is absolutely dreadful—even humiliating. The solution is not to look for storage rooms where they can meet for three hours, but to resolve the situation fundamentally" (Cigániková, 2021).

These firsthand accounts echo the findings of Szalma and Rékai (2020), who examined the decline in in-person contact between nonresident parents and children during the Covid-19 pandemic in Hungary. However, while their study notes that online contact partially substituted for physical proximity, the articles we have found did not discuss online meetings.

4.2.2. Support for Conservative Family Values

Shared custody reflects the principles of involved parenthood, emphasizing equal parental participation and reframing men's roles from distant breadwinners to active caregivers. However, in this case, their support for shared custody reflects a conservative value system. For example, Český svaz mužů (2007) lamented on its website that "the traditional family" was under "attack" and protested against the alleged "destruction of traditional family values." K213 criticized supporters of "pseudo-intellectual feminist ideology" because of their (a) "denial of the social value of traditional women in the home" and (b) "rejection of the usual role of the father in the family" (Fiala, 2017). K213 also showed its support for conservative versions of Christianity and complained about the "dying Christian world" that "enabled feminism to arise" (Fiala, 2020a). Since they support the "traditional" family, they also oppose LGBT+ rights. In addition, Střídavka, Unie otců, and K213 have all participated in a protest against the gay Pride week (D.O.S.T., 2012).

Although support for traditional family values is not the main topic of recent posts, it is clear that the traditional model of a heterosexual partnership and family is viewed as the norm. In this context, numerous posts on stridavka.cz criticize the legal changes allowing same-sex couples to enjoy the same rights as heterosexual couples in terms of marriage. For instance, in the article "Catalyzed Marriage: Will the Constitutional Court Introduce Same-sex Marriage?" (*Katalyzované manželství: Zavede Ústavní soud stejnopohlavní manželství?*) the author argues:

> The fact that marriage, as a permanent mutual self-giving of a man and a woman, differs substantially from the cohabitation of same-sex persons…bringing children into the world and the need for their upbringing (among other things) justifies the demands for stability and exclusivity of the relationship. We call this interpersonal reality marriage; we could call it something else, and it would not change its existence. (Kříž, 2025)

Another example is the post "Some Children Lost the Right to Their Mother" (*Některé děti přišly o právo na mámu*; see Jochová, 2025), written by the ultra-conservative activist Jana Jochová, representative of the Aliance pro rodinu, who states that the adoption of the amendment on partnerships for same-sex couples "has, in essence, entirely allowed the adoption of children by homosexual couples," which is seen as violence against traditional family values.

The discourse around conservative Czech men's organizations reveals a paradoxical dynamic: While these groups embrace elements of "new masculinity" by advocating for shared custody and emphasizing men's active engagement in child-rearing, their rhetoric remains rooted in a conservative, hetero-normative framework. They support the preservation of the "traditional family," understood as a heterosexual union centered on gender-complementary parenting. Men's organizations (except for LOM) explicitly link fatherhood to defending traditional gender hierarchies, often framing feminist and LGBT+ rights as threats to familial stability and moral order. This suggests that their advocacy for shared custody is about reinforcing paternal authority within a conservative social order.

4.2.3. Anti-Feminism

Because of their support for conservative family values, these organizations are strongly anti-feminist. Even though demands for shared custody would logically fall in line with feminist demands for gender equality and eliminating gender roles, these activists are extremely critical and even hateful toward the feminist movement. Thus, many texts on K213.cz portray fathers as victims of an unjust system dominated by "feminist courts" and biased social services. In "Unwanted Testimonies Are the Most Truthful" (*Nechtěná svědectví jsou ta nejpravdivější*), an organization describing a custody battle concludes that:

> The Courts in Olomouc are notorious feminist strongholds. Almost exclusively female judges preside there, and they blatantly favor mothers….These female judges—in support of their unlawful custody practices—commission so-called "expert opinions" only from pre-selected "female experts," who then produce professionally worthless nonsense in support of maternal care. (Fiala, 2020b)

Similarly, on the website stridavka.cz, article entitled "Father Running Away" (*Otec na útěku*) talks about biased "feminist courts" and the criminalization of fathers merely for wanting to see their children (Jadlovský, 2025). These texts undeniably bring forward marginalized experiences of men in custody battles but do so through a highly adversarial and gender-polarized rhetoric. Not only do these men's activists oppose what they consider to be "feminism," they often display aggression toward women and a system that they claim women and feminists control. Thus, advocacy texts often gloss over these complexities, presenting alternating custody as an unquestioned good arrangement for children, which is opposed by both the system and the individual mothers. As a men's activist writes on stridavka.cz: "State gender discrimination against fathers is a systemic phenomenon" (Le Haaro, 2023). Rather than framing fatherhood as

collaborative caregiving, the discourse often casts it as a battleground for men resisting an oppressive, feminized system. This "warrior father" narrative offers one form of masculine reinvention but risks reinforcing adversarial gender binaries instead of promoting relational, co-parenting models.

Not only do they blame the allegedly feminist system for being against them, they also show hostility toward mothers. In "Child as Hostage of the System?" (*Dítě jako rukojmí systému?*), the author writes: "The children in these stories are certainly not hostages of the system, but of selfish mothers….Some mothers are willing to employ highly conflictual strategies to exclude fathers from their children's lives" (Hodina, 2025). This framing personalizes systemic issues and situates blame on individual mothers, presenting them as manipulative actors, while fathers are portrayed as powerless victims.

The content on K213.cz and stridavka.cz reproduces simplified, polarized narratives: Women are frequently depicted as "selfish" or "manipulative," while fathers are framed as helpless victims of a "feminist judiciary." The idea of new masculinities—masculine identities redefined through caregiving, emotional engagement, and gender equality—emerges only indirectly in these texts. Fathers are presented as proactive caregivers and defenders of their children's rights, an identity shift from the distant breadwinner to the engaged parent. Yet this redefinition is entangled with resentment and combative rhetoric. In terms of new masculinities, these texts advance the image of the engaged, caring father—but one forged in opposition, characterized by defensiveness and antagonism toward women and institutions. This undermines the transformative potential of new fatherhood by reinforcing the very gendered conflicts it seeks to transcend.

These websites present themselves as defenders of fathers' positions in family law and as critics of institutional bias in custody disputes. In the case of the conservative men's organizations, involved fatherhood has been limited to the period after divorce as an excuse for demanding shared custody. Since the activists claim to support the "traditional" family, they do not advocate for involved fatherhood *before* the divorce.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, Czech men's activists align well with the pre-industrial view of gender relations. The man should be in charge of the family, but he must be able to provide for the family. Male organizations, except for LOM, therefore, construct a polarized gender narrative: mothers appear as obstructive and emotionally manipulative, while fathers are positioned as righteous victims and warriors for justice. This framing advances a version of involved fatherhood defined through opposition to gender equality rather than relational care and shared care arrangements. Despite their shared ideological core, K213.cz and stridavka.cz differ in tone, authorship, and strategic focus. While both organizations criticize what they perceive as bias within the family court system, stridavka.cz engages more actively with broader intellectual and policy debates. It often re-publishes professional and expert opinions, including the then Czech Minister of Justice, Eva Decroix's article on post-separation judicial arrangements in France. K213.cz, by contrast, tends to avoid an engagement with the expert discourse, framing the issue instead as a moral struggle between fathers and an unjust institutional system.

Even though all the conservative men's organizations display a pre-modern masculinity, some differences emerge among them. Both K213.cz and Unie otců function primarily as personal advocacy platforms for their founders. The sites blend legal commentary, polemics, and autobiographical reflections, often adopting

a militant tone against the judiciary, social services, and feminist movements. Their content emphasizes direct confrontation with state institutions; their rhetorical style is aggressive, emotional, and appeals to the collective outrage and solidarity among wronged fathers.

In contrast, stridavka.cz presents itself as a broader discussion forum for fathers and sympathizers. Its discourse, while still highly critical of institutions, tends to be more discursive and argumentative, seeking legitimacy through references to legal norms, psychological expertise, and public debates. Aleš Hodina, the founder, frequently positions himself as an expert advocate rather than a personal victim, publishing serialized commentaries, book reviews, and polemical essays.

While the image of an "involved father" is present in all men's organizations in the Czech Republic, except for LOM, they are embedded in antagonistic masculinities, limiting the transformative potential of any kind of caring masculinity. Rather than framing fatherhood as collaborative caregiving, the discourse often casts custody cases as a battleground for men resisting an oppressive, feminized system. This "warrior father" narrative offers one form of masculine reinvention but risks reinforcing adversarial gender binaries instead of promoting relational, co-parenting models.

This article highlights the manner in which masculinities are reconfigured through care practices and fatherhood discourses. There is a growing literature on the advantages of involved fatherhood and caring masculinities. In the Czech case, only one men's organization, LOM, promotes this type of masculinity, while the other men's organizations display a pre-modern type of masculinity, in which the family (including the mother and children) is the man's property. Given this view, it is not contradictory for these organizations to fight for shared custody of their children during divorces, while still advocating a "traditional family," in which the man is the head of the household. Similar to Poland (Wojnicka, 2016), some men's rights activists have claimed that fathers are actually better than mothers in raising their children, while at the same time promoting the traditional family. Given the starting point, in which the courts used to almost automatically give custody to the mothers, it made more sense to fight for shared custody rather than full custody. This article shows that the demand for shared or joint custody does not automatically imply some kind of caring masculinity. As Wojnicka (2016) shows for the Polish case, the demand for custody or joint custody can be part of a conservative type of masculinity. By tracing the origins of this type of thought to pre-modern times, this article shows that it does not have to be a contradiction to want to care for children after a divorce and still not have a caring masculinity. Rather than displaying a hybrid masculinity (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019) that includes a caring masculinity, these conservative men want to go back to a system in which the men were the head of the household and, as the head, they have the right to their "property" even after a divorce.

We use "pre-modern masculinity" not to suggest a direct historical survival of preindustrial practices, but as an *ideal-typical logic of gender relations* characterized by paternal authority, family-as-property, and conditional responsibility. In contemporary contexts, this logic may coexist with modern legal forms and backlash politics. Nonetheless, the demand of the conservative men's organizations for joint custody coincides with the demands of feminist groups for shared parental leave and shared custody. So far, Czechia has made little progress in promoting shared parental leave, but policies have gradually made shared custody after divorce much more common, which still promotes some amount of caring masculinity even if it differs from the goals of the conservative men's organizations. If it becomes common for fathers to share custody of their children after divorce, then it can also make it clear that they are capable of sharing parental leave.

Consequently, even though Czechia has a conservative, explicitly genderized parental leave system, reforms in custody laws that normalize shared post-divorce parenting may gradually shift cultural values toward greater gender equality. Over time, such changes could make it easier to introduce degenderizing parental leave policies, including well-paid paternity leave and father quotas that would promote a caring masculinity and greatly increase the involvement of fathers in childcare.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors of the thematic issue and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript and for their insightful comments. Their feedback helped strengthen the theoretical framing, methodological clarity, and overall quality of the article.

Funding

Work on this publication was supported by the Cooperatio Program provided by Charles University, research area SOAS, implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Södertörn University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

As noted in the method section, the online materials were identified both manually by the authors with the assistance of AI tools (ChatGPT-5.0) to enhance search efficiency.

References

Atkinson, J. (2025). Reconciling the ideal worker norm and involved fatherhood: New fathers' experiences of requesting shared parental leave in UK organizations. *Community, Work & Family*, *28*(3), 363–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2023.2274276

Bach, A. S. (2017). The ambiguous construction of nondominant masculinity: Configuring the "new" man through narratives of choice, involved fatherhood, and gender equality. *Men and Masculinities*, *22*(2), 338–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17715494

Bailey, J. (2007). Reassessing parenting in eighteenth-century England. In H. Berry & E. Foyster (Eds.), *The family in early modern England* (pp. 209–232). Cambridge University Press.

Baude, A., Pearson, J., & Drapeau, S. (2016). Child adjustment in joint physical custody versus sole custody: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *57*(5), 338–360. https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2016.1185203

Čevelová, L., & Reich, M. (2023). Divorce during the Concordat at Marriage Courts of Prague and Trent (1857–1868). In A. Griesebner & E. Doxiadis (Eds.) *Gender and divorce in Europe: 1600–1900: A praxeological perspective* (pp. 115–147). Routledge.

Chojnacki, S. (1994). Subaltern patriarchs: Patrician bachelors in renaissance Venice. In C. A. Lees, T. S. Fenster, & J. A. McNamara (Eds.), *Medieval masculinities: regarding men in the middle ages* (Vol. 7, pp. 73–90). University of Minnesota Press.

Cigániková, L. (2021, February 4). Nouzový stav „zavařil" rodičům, kteří šli od sebe! S dcerkou mrznu venku nebo v autě, popsal tatínek. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/nouzovy-stav-zavaril-rodicum-kteri-sli-od-sebe-s-dcerkou-mrznu-venku-nebo-v-aute-popsal-tatinek

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.

D.O.S.T. (2012, August 17). Obrana hrdosti normálních lidí – Akce D.O.S.T. protestuje vlastním shromážděním proti „festivalu“ Prague Pride. *Akce D.O.S.T.* http://www.akce-dost.cz/2012/08/17/obrana-hrdosti-normalnich-lidi-akce-d-o-s-t-protestuje-vlastnim-shromazdenim-proti-festivalu-prague-pride

de Beauvoir, S. (1956). *The second sex*. Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1949).

Eisen, D., & Yamashita, T. (2019). Borrowing from femininity: The caring man, hybrid masculinities, and maintaining male dominance. *Men and Masculinities*, *22*(5), 801–820. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17728552

Eisenbichler, K., & Murray, J. (Eds.). (2024). *Pre-modern masculinities in transition* (Vol. 23). Boydell & Brewer.

Elliott, K. (2016). Caring masculinities: Theorizing an emerging concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *19*(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203

Elliott, K. (2020). Caring masculinities: Conceptual and policy insights. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *27*(6), 1733–1742. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12423

Fafejta, M. (2018). Fathers' rights movement as a subaltern counterpublic. *Sociológia*, *50*(3), 225–245. https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/07041045Fafejta%20-%203-2018.pdf

Fiala, J. (2017, April 30). Ženy a (trestní) justice: Pozitivní diskriminace je samozřejmostí. *K213.cz*. http://www.k213.cz/JOOMLA/2675-zeny-a-justice-pozitivni-diskriminace-je-samozrejmosti

Fiala, J. (2020a, June 23). [Comment on the article "Čas činů"]. *K213.cz*. http://www.k213.cz/JOOMLA/3287-cas-cinuv#comment-12908

Fiala, J. (2020b, December 29). Nechtěná svědectví jsou ta nejpravdivější… *K213.cz*. http://www.k213.cz/JOOMLA/3420-nechtena-svedectvi-jsou-ta-nejpravdivejsi

Fleßenkämper, I. (2023). Enduring animosity: Negotiating post-separation conflicts in the German County of Lippe (17th and 18th centuries). In A. Griesebner & E. Doxiadis (Eds.), *Gender and divorce in Europe: 1600–1900: A praxeological perspective* (pp. 147–160). Routledge.

Folberg, H. J., & Graham, M. (1979). Joint custody of children following divorce. *University of California Davis Law Review*, *12*, 523–562.

Forejtová, M., & Grygerová, J. (2016). Střídavá péče v rozhodovací praxi českých soudů. *Právní rozhledy*, *24*(8), 273–279.

Fučík, P., & Šolcová, M. (2022). *Nové formy rodičovství: Střídavá péče a hledání jejích důsledků pro děti*. Masaryk University. https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-9897-2022

Graf, T. E., & Wojnicka, K. (2023). Post-separation fatherhood narratives in Germany and Sweden: Between caring and protective masculinities. *Journal of Family Studies*, *29*(3), 1022–1042. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2021.2020148

Grau Grau, M., Las Heras Maestro, M., & Bowles, H. R. (Eds.). (2022). *Engaged fatherhood for men, families, and gender equality*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75645-1

Griesebner, A., & Hehenberger, S. (2023). Separated beds—Interwoven. In A. Griesebner & E. Doxiadis (Eds.), *Gender and divorce in Europe: 1600–1900: A praxeological perspective* (pp. 161–180). Routledge.

Hanlon, N. (2012). *Masculinities, care and equality: Identity and nurture in men's lives*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hodina, A. (2025, March 18). Dítě jako rukojmí systému? *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/dite-jako-rukojmi-systemu

Jadlovský, T. (2025, May 28). Otec na útěku—Slovem i písmem 1. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/otec-na-uteku-slovem-i-pismem-1

Jaspal, R. (2020). Content analysis, thematic analysis and discourse analysis. In G. M. Breakwell, D. B. Wright, & J. Barnett (Eds.), *Research methods in psychology* (5th ed.). Sage.

Jauregi, N. J. I. (2023). Divorce in Early Modern Bilbao. In A. Griesebner & E. Doxiadis (Eds.), *Gender and divorce in Europe: 1600–1900: A praxeological perspective* (pp. 70–83). Taylor & Francis.

Jochová, J. (2025, April 15). Některé děti přišly o právo na mámu. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/nektere-deti-prisly-o-pravo-na-mamu

Jordan, A. (2016). Conceptualizing backlash: (UK) men's rights groups, anti-feminism, and postfeminism. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, *28*(1), 18–44. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.28.1.18

Jordan, A. (2019). *The new politics of fatherhood: Men's movements and masculinities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jordan, A. (2020). Masculinizing care? Gender, ethics of care, and fathers' rights groups. *Men and Masculinities*, *23*(1), 20–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X18776364

Karzabi, I. (2017). Fathers' activism in Ukraine: Contradictory positions on gender equality. In K. Fábián & E. Korolczuk (Eds.), *Rebellious parents* (pp. 171–196). Indiana University Press.

Kluzák, R. (2011, February 5). Střídavá péče je účinným prostředkem, jak zlepšit poměry dětí. *K213.cz*. https://www.k213.cz/JOOMLA/1062-archiv-1068

Korolczuk, E., & Hryciuk, R. E. (2017). In the name of the family and nation: Framing fathers' activism in contemporary Poland. In K. Fábián & E. Korolczuk (Eds.), *Rebellious parents* (pp. 113–144). Indiana University Press.

Kozelka, P. (2020, April 29). Matka odmítá předat dítě otci. Prý kvůli pandemii. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/matka-odmita-predat-dite-otci-pry-kvuli-pandemii

Kříž, J. (2025, March 31). Katalyzované manželství. Zavede Ústavní soud stejnopohlavní manželství?. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/katalyzovane-manzelstvi-zavede-ustavni-soud-stejnopohlavni-manzelstvi

Lanczová, I. (2017). The divorce law in the Kingdom of Hungary. *Z Dziejów Prawa*, *10*, 43–59.

Le Haaro. (2023, March 15). Otec na útěku—Recenze knihy. *Střídavka.cz*. https://stridavka.cz/otec-na-uteku-recenze-knihy

LOM. (2023, May 31). *Doby, kdy byly děti pouze ženskou doménou jsou ty tam!* 👨‍👧 💪 *Muži se do výchovy zapojují čím dál tím víc, a roste nám tu generace aktivních tátů, která nemá obdoby. Zaměstnavatelé, kteří na táty ve své firmě myslí, budou brzy o pořádný krok před ostatními* [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/login.php?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fprofile%2F100064429614507%2Fsearch%2F%3Fq%3DT%25C3%25A1ta%2Bse%2Bvyplat%25C3%25AD%2B

Murray, J. (2024). Introduction. In K. Eisenbichler & J. Murray (Eds.), *Pre-modern masculinities in transition* (pp. 1–14). Boydell & Brewer.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2018). Content analysis and thematic analysis. In P. Brough (Ed.), *Advanced research methods for applied psychology* (pp. 211–223). Routledge.

Newman, J. M. (2024). Work, writing, and elite masculinity in the lyrics of Baudri of Bourgueil. In K. Eisenbichler & J. Murray (Eds.), *Pre-modern masculinities in transition* (pp. 15–30). Boydell & Brewer.

Petts, R. J., Carlson, D. L., & Knoester, C. (2020). If I take leave, will you stay? Paternity leave and relationship stability. *Journal of Social Policy*, *49*(4), 829–849. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000928

Ruby, S., & Scholz, S. (2018). Care and masculinity: A critical dialogue. *Men and Masculinities*, *21*(1), 71–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X16652673

Saxonberg, S. (2013). From defamilialization to degenderization: Toward a new welfare typology. *Social Policy & Administration*, *47*(1), 26–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2012.00836.x

Saxonberg, S. (2014). *Gendering family policies in post-communist Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Saxonberg, S. (2017). Down and out in a "femo-fascist" state: The Czech fathers' discussion forum. In K. Fábián & E. Korolczuk (Eds.), *Rebellious parents*. Indiana University Press.

Saxonberg, S. (2019). *Pre-modernity, totalitarianism and the non-banality of evil*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Scambor, E., Bergmann, N., Wojnicka, K., Belghiti-Mahut, S., Hearn, J., Holter, Ø. G., Gärtner, M., Hrženjak, M., Scambor, C., & White, A. (2014). Men and gender equality: European insights. *Men and Masculinities*, *17*(5), 552–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X14558239

Steinbach, A. (2019). Children's and parents' well-being in joint physical custody: A literature review. *Family Process*, *58*(2), 353–369. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12372

Strelnyk, O. (2017). Conservative parents' mobilization in Ukraine. In K. Fábián & E. Korolczuk (Eds.), *Rebellious parents* (pp. 61–90). Indiana University Press.

Szalma, I., & Rékai, K. (2020). Personal and online contact during the COVID-19 pandemic among nonresident parents and their children in Hungary. *International Journal of Sociology*, *50*(6), 495–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2020.1786635

Tague, I. (2007). Aristocratic women and ideas of family in the early eighteenth century. In H. Berry & E. Foyster (Eds.), *The family in early modern England* (pp. 184–208). Cambridge University Press.

Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.

Unie otců. (2022, October 13). *Informace: Děti mají právo na oba rodiče*. https://www.unie-otcu.cz/informace.html

Wojnicka, K. (2016). Masculist groups in Poland: Aids of mainstream antifeminism. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, *5*(2), 36–49. https://doi.org/10.3316/INFORMIT.240011321403326

Wojnicka, K., & de Boise, S. (2025). Caring masculinities: Rethinking the concept. *Men and Masculinities*, *28*(4), 339–358. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X251327673

Yogman, M. W., & Eppel, A. M. (2022). The role of fathers in child and family health. In M. Grau Grau, M. Las Heras Maestro, & H. R. Bowles (Eds.), *Engaged fatherhood for men, families and gender equality* (pp. 15–32). Springer.

About the Authors



Steven Saxonberg is a professor of sociology at Södertörn University in Sweden and a research associate at the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at Masaryk University, Czechia. He has published extensively on family policy, social policy, welfare attitudes, social movements, populism, democratization, and totalitarianism.



Lenka Formanková (PhD) is an assistant professor at the Department of Social Work, Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic). Her research focuses on gender inequalities in employment and care, family policy, workplace relations, precarious migrant work, partnership dynamics, and the division of household labor.

Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10865
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10865

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Housework, Childcare, and Fertility Intentions: The Role of Fathers' Involvement in Belarus

Kamila Ishchanova

Department of Demography and Geodemography, Charles University, Czech Republic

Correspondence: Kamila Ishchanova (ishchank@natur.cuni.cz)

Submitted: 30 June 2025 **Accepted:** 27 November 2025 **Published:** 21 January 2026

Issue: This article 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

The impact of fathers' involvement in household tasks on fertility intentions is being both increasingly acknowledged and contested. This article adds to the evidence base by analysing the relationship between fathers' involvement in childcare and housework and the short-term fertility intentions of mothers and fathers in Belarus. Due to its fertility dynamics, marked by early first childbearing, low-to-no second childbearing, and high divorce rates, the case of Belarus presents an opportunity to revisit theoretical assumptions surrounding fathers' involvement and their role in second-parity transitions. Employing the results of the Generations and Gender Survey (2017) for Belarus, I performed separate logistic regressions for mothers and fathers who are fertile, aged 18 to 45, in a partnership, and have at least one child under 14 years of age in the household. The results revealed that fathers' involvement in childcare is positively associated with the fertility intentions of the fathers, but not those of the mothers. In contrast, fathers' involvement in housework is positively associated with the fertility intentions of the mothers, but not those of the fathers. Furthermore, education, the self-assessed household economic situation, and employment status are associated with fertility intentions, while gender-related values are not. The results provide partial support for the multiple equilibrium framework, but also challenge its underlying assumption that gender role symmetry drives higher fertility. Rather, the study reveals that the effects of fathers' participation in the household are contingent on gender and the type of task, and that factors related both to gender and to economic well-being and certainty should be considered when analysing fertility intentions.

Keywords

Belarus; childcare tasks; fathers' involvement; fertility intentions; gender equality; housework tasks

© 2026 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Fathers' involvement in housework and childcare is seen as an important, yet contested, determinant of second-childbearing. Although a large body of research has confirmed the relevance of the relationship between fathers' involvement in the household and fertility, the evidence on the strength of this relationship, as well as the extent to which these effects are contingent on gender and the type of tasks, is, to date, inconclusive (Raybould & Sear, 2021). Furthermore, most analyses have focused on countries with fertility regimes that are more akin to the dynamics observed in Western Europe and Scandinavia (e.g., Aassve et al., 2015; Fanelli & Profeta, 2021). No comparable analyses have yet been conducted on Belarus, which differs from most other Central and Eastern European countries due to its early first childbearing, low-to-no second childbearing, and high divorce rates, as opposed to other countries that experience higher postponement and lower marriage rates.

This article examines the relationship between fathers' involvement in childcare and housework tasks and the short-term fertility intentions of parents in Belarus via the conducting of separate logistic regressions for mothers and fathers who are fertile and aged 18 to 45, in a partnership, and who have at least one child under the age of 14 years in the household. The analysis employed data provided by wave 1 (2017) of the international Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) for Belarus (Sakalova & Rotman, 2020). The analysis considers fathers' involvement in both childcare and housework, household income, gender-egalitarian values, and other demographic characteristics.

This article adds to the evidence base on fertility intentions in post-socialist countries in several ways. Firstly, it explores how fathers' involvement in household tasks is related to short-term fertility intentions. While second-parity fertility (i.e., the transition from having one child to having two children) has received significant attention from policymakers, its determinants differ from those that influence first-parity fertility (Riederer et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2014). As such, the determination of the role of fathers' involvement in household tasks is key to understanding second-parity fertility. Secondly, the article examines the case of Belarus, which comprises both an understudied and specific case in the post-socialist country context. The specific fertility characteristics of Belarus, i.e., relatively stable marriage rates, early first-childbearing, high first-parity fertility, and low second-parity fertility, are particularly suited to the study of the drivers of the fertility intentions of parents. Moreover, in contrast to other post-socialist countries with low marriage rates, Belarus has a high divorce rate (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-a). Thus, the research sample includes co-resident children, both biological and non-biological. Thirdly, the study included the conducting of separate analyses for mothers and fathers aimed at identifying gender-specific relationships. Fourthly, it examines childcare and housework separately, and controls for sociodemographic factors, economic well-being, and gender values. This approach serves to reveal the specific effects of fathers' involvement in housework and childcare, while considering alternative explanations for fertility intentions, in order to present a comprehensive overview.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 examines fertility trends in Belarus in the historical context, reviews the state of evidence on gender norms in Belarus, and analyses family policy frameworks in order to assess the extent to which they incorporate aspects of fathers' involvement. Section 3 synthesises the existing theory and evidence on gender role symmetry and fathers' involvement as explanatory factors

of fertility. Section 4 introduces the dataset and the variables applied. Section 5 then analyses the results. Section 6 provides conclusions based on the research findings.

2. Fertility in Belarus: Context, Norms, and Policies

2.1. Historical Context and Fertility Development in Belarus

A short summary of the historical context is required to fully understand fertility trends in Belarus. Following the end of World War II, the Soviet Union rapidly integrated women into the workforce as industrialisation increased the demand for labour. Belarus was one of the leading Soviet states in terms of providing affordable childcare and parental leave, thus enabling women to balance work and family life (Lebid, 2021; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). Furthermore, the socialist regime made significant strides in terms of enhancing the access of women to education and reproductive rights. As a result, the participation of women in the workforce surged, and two-child families remained the prevailing norm. However, gender inequality continued to linger beneath the surface. Women were disproportionately represented in low-skilled jobs and lacked opportunities for career advancement; moreover, they were expected to shoulder the dual burden of paid professional work and unpaid domestic labour (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Pascall & Manning, 2000; Szikra & Szelewa, 2010).

During the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus underwent significant economic transformation; it shifted from a centrally planned economy with the security of a welfare state to an unstable, market-oriented economy. As a result, Belarus faced a deep structural economic crisis during the transition period of the 1990s (Sobotka, 2003). The transition from state-controlled to privately-owned companies, along with changes in the labour market and labour demand, led to economic uncertainty, job insecurity, and unemployment. This subsequently resulted in a sharp decline in GDP, which negatively impacted family incomes and increased the costs of housing, credit, and childbearing and rearing (Allison & Ringold, 1996; Frejka, 2008; Matysiak, 2009).

The Belarusian total fertility rate (TFR) dropped significantly during the economic crisis, falling from above-replacement levels in the Soviet era to just 1.33 in 1996, according to the Human Fertility Database (HFD, 2021). Between 1997 and 2005, the TFR reached the "lowest-low fertility" rate, defined by Kohler et al. (2002) as a TFR of below 1.3. Although the TFR began to recover after 2006, so as to reach 1.71 in 2015 (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-b), Belarus experienced a further sharp decline in the TFR from 1.72 to 1.08 between 2016 and 2024. Recent evidence suggests that this decline can, at least partly, be explained by increasing social insecurity, rising living costs, political instability, and a negative macroeconomic outlook, all of which counteracted the effectiveness of family policy measures (Sharilova & Bandarenka, 2022; UDF.BY, 2021). Furthermore, demographic cohort shrinkage appears to have played a major role; the TFR applies to all women of reproductive age, whereas fertility intentions are strongly and negatively associated with increasing age. As a result of the sharp fertility decline during the 1990s, the decreasing number of young women who entered reproductive age created a structural inertia that was difficult to reverse (Frejka & Sobotka, 2008; Kłysiński, 2023).

In contrast to most Western European and Central European countries, which experienced the extended postponement of childbearing, or tempo effects, and low first-parity fertility, the fertility dynamics in Belarus were characterised by only moderate postponement, high first-parity fertility, and low second-parity

fertility, which translated into a real reduction in the number of children, or quantum effects (Ishchanova, 2022). As opposed to other post-socialist countries, which experienced relatively low marriage rates, Belarus experienced relatively stable marriage rates and cohabitation, but also high divorce rates, which ranged between 3.0 and 4.1 divorces per 1,000 mid-year population between 2004 and 2017, i.e., in the 13 years prior to wave 1 of the GGS (see also National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-a).

At the same time, a representative survey conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies in 2014 confirmed a significant discrepancy between the desired number of children—2.4 on average—and the actual number—1.3 (Artemenko, 2016). These results suggest that the TFR could, at least in theory, have been above the replacement level if it had not been depressed by other factors that prevented the progression from first to second-parity fertility. Together with high mortality, especially among working-age groups, and net emigration, Belarus's fertility dynamics contributed to the trend towards depopulation (Shakhotko, 2008).

2.2. Fertility and Gender Norms in Belarus

In comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries, Belarus experienced only moderate postponement or tempo effects, but strong quantum effects, which were driven by low second-birthrates (Ishchanova, 2022). Gender norms in Belarus generally encouraged early childbearing (Ananyeu et al., 2013). The latest available comparative data from 2021 indicate that Belarus had the third-lowest mean age at first birth (MAB1) in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., 26.9, behind Moldova (25.1) and Bulgaria (26.5), and followed by Romania (27.1) and Slovakia (27.3; UNECE, n.d.). It is worth noting that the MAB1 in Belarus has increased in recent years from 26.5 in 2017 to 27.24 in 2024, according to national statistics (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-c). While this trend mirrors that of other European countries, according to the available data, the Belarusian MAB1 is not yet catching up to that of other countries.

Traditional gender norms continue to shape expectations of women as the primary caregivers and domestic housekeepers, while fathers often maintain a secondary role in the performance of household tasks (Saxonberg, 2014; Steinbach & Maslauskaitė, 2022). Moreover, the overall decline in GDP and income, rising unemployment, and the corresponding increase in the elasticity of the participation of the female workforce have created a macroeconomic environment in which women prioritise workforce participation over having additional children (Pastore & Verashchagina, n.d.). The female labour force participation rate remains high at 83.3% and almost matches the male labour force participation rate of 84.8% according to data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2024). Almost the same percentage of women worked 21–40 hours per week in 2024 (women 81.1% vs. men 88.7%), while only 5.4% of women worked up to 20 hours (compared to 2.1% of men). Additional data from 2015 reveal that women spend more than twice as much time on household work as men, which suggests that women face a substantial double burden (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-d). Given this context, women in Belarus and comparable Eastern European countries tend to have only one child so as "to satisfy the social norm of becoming a mother, while at the same time limiting the inevitable double burden of working full-time and taking care of household tasks" (Zeman et al., 2018).

2.3. Family Policy in Belarus

The Government of the Republic of Belarus has expressed concern about the negative impacts of population decline on the economy, social systems, infrastructure, and even national security. Consequently, it has adopted demographic policies that aim to address the country's low fertility rate. Following the adoption of the Law on Demographic Security in 2002, the Belarusian government established a legal framework for regulating demographic processes (Bobrova et al., 2019). It subsequently introduced several national programmes that apply policy tools in the family policy sector so as to encourage population growth. More recently, the Belarusian government launched the Nation's Health and Demographic Security in Belarus, 2021–2025 programme.

The Belarusian Government has introduced pronatalist family policy instruments. Belarusian family policy primarily follows the neoclassical model, which prioritises financial incentives for childbearing over policies that address gender inequality and the triple burden of housework, caregiving, and professional employment (Ishchanova, 2022). Financial incentives include progressive benefits for first and subsequent births. Moreover, the government provides institutional care for children under three, as well as housing, tax, and credit benefits for families with children, and enhanced financial support for families with children with disabilities (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 2016; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection et al., 2011; Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2025).

While universal childcare is available, the majority of parents only claim this benefit for children aged 3–5. The National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2019) estimates that around 96% of children in the 3–5 age group attended preschool care centres in 2017, with no substantial changes reported compared to previous years. In contrast, the percentage of children aged 1–2 was substantially lower in 2017 at 39.7%, up from 35.1% in 2013. Concerning school-aged children, parents have the right to petition for institutional childcare for up to six hours following the standard school day, which is granted provided a critical mass of requests is received and the school is equipped to provide meals and materials (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, 2011). The share of pupils in grades 1–9 who were enrolled in after-school daycare groups in educational institutions in 2017 was comparatively low at 20% of the total number of children enrolled in school, with no notable changes compared to previous years (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2019).

The Belarusian population policy agenda incorporates a number of gender-egalitarian policy instruments, including measures aimed at incentivising the involvement of fathers. However, the effectiveness of these instruments is severely limited by the insufficient financial resources committed to them (Ishchanova, 2022). Parental leave is available for up to three years, though the income replacement level is low and not tied to previous earnings (Social Security Administration, 2018). While both mothers and fathers are entitled to take parental leave, the uptake rate of fathers is very low. According to the most recent available data, between 2016 and 2019, the percentage of female and male employees (aged 15–74) on parental leave up to age three differed significantly: approximately 10% of women compared to only 0–0.2% of men (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2020). A new gender-egalitarian policy was introduced in 2020 that granted fathers 14 days of leave within six months of the birth of a child. However, paternal leave is unpaid unless the employer voluntarily continues to pay the father's salary (Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2025).

Belarus continues to face substantial data and evidence gaps. While the TFR in Belarus rose from 1.49 in 2010 to 1.71 in 2015, it remained significantly below the replacement level of 2.1 (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.-b). Although this increase may have been linked to the National Programme of Demographic Security of Belarus, no causal analysis has been performed aimed at confirming which measures, if any, were effective. In addition, the TFR declined again after 2016, even dropping below the minimum target TFR of 1.32 set by the government in the Nation's Health and Demographic Security in Belarus, 2021–2025 programme (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 2021).

3. A Theoretical Framework for Fathers' Involvement and Fertility

Fertility scholars generally concur that fathers' involvement in household work comprises an important, yet contested, explanatory factor for fertility intentions and behaviour. As societies underwent post-industrial transformation in the second half of the 20th century and fertility rates plummeted, the debate on fertility was dominated primarily by the neoclassical theory after Becker (1991) and the second demographic transition narrative after van de Kaa (2001). The debate surrounding fathers' involvement in household tasks initially gained traction in the early 2000s, when it was observed that Nordic countries with higher gender symmetry—i.e., higher female participation in the labour market and higher male participation in household work—experienced a fertility rebound to above-replacement level (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000; Myrskylä et al., 2011). In contrast, countries with high levels of gender equality in the labour market but low levels of gender equality with respect to the distribution of household work observed no such change. Crucially, the fertility rebound in Nordic countries was driven largely by more highly-educated women, which contradicts the neoclassical argument that higher education levels are associated with a higher opportunity cost of having children (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015). Conversely, the second demographic transition arguably underemphasised structural factors, as illustrated by the facts that family preferences remained remarkably stable amidst declining fertility and that the fertility decline was reversed with increasing human development (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Myrskylä et al., 2011).

The multiple equilibrium framework has emerged as a corrective theoretical context that posits that fertility trajectories in industrial and post-industrial societies follow a U-shaped transition from a traditional male-breadwinner/female-homemaker equilibrium (high fertility), through a dual-earner/female-homemaker state (low fertility), to a dual-earner/dual-career equilibrium (rebound; see Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000). The multiple equilibrium framework bridges structuralist and culturalist arguments by suggesting that two classes of mechanisms act to reduce gender role asymmetry and facilitate higher fertility: firstly, institutional adjustments such as generous parental leave, flexible work, and institutional childcare, which potentially reduce the cost of combining employment and childbearing, and secondly, fathers' involvement in household tasks, which acts to reduce the double burden borne by mothers (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000). A range of demographic studies have linked the higher participation of fathers in housework and childcare to higher second and third-parity fertility (Aassve et al., 2015; Fodor et al., 2002; Mencarini & Tanturri, 2004; Oláh, 2003; Oláh & Bernhardt, 2008; Pinnelli & Fiori, 2008; Spéder & Kapitány, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014).

However, recent studies and systematic reviews indicate that a higher degree of nuance is required. Four points of criticism stand out. Firstly, evidence shows that fertility is not positively influenced by perfect

gender role symmetry across all household tasks, but rather by the balanced and complementary distribution of household tasks (Raybould & Sear, 2021). On a related note, other research revealed that households in which men participate substantially more in housework than women are also more likely to experience lower fertility (Dommermuth et al., 2017).

Secondly, the effect of fathers' involvement in household work on fertility intentions depends on which household tasks are shared and whose fertility intentions are being examined (Neyer et al., 2013; Riederer et al., 2019). Time-use and attitudes research shows that housework is generally perceived as less enjoyable and more burdensome than childcare (Koster et al., 2022; Poortman & Van Der Lippe, 2009; Sullivan, 2013). An emerging body of studies has further confirmed that the fertility intentions and behaviour of parents are related to the participation of fathers in housework, but have determined no, weak and contingent, or even negative, associations between fertility intentions and behaviour and the participation of fathers in childcare (Fanelli & Profeta, 2021; Leocádio et al., 2024; Raybould & Sear, 2021; Riederer et al., 2019). In addition, new evidence suggests that the participation of fathers in childcare is positively associated with the fertility intentions of fathers but not those of mothers (Leocádio et al., 2024).

Thirdly, recent evidence suggests that the relationship between fathers' involvement in household tasks and fertility is moderated by attitudes, expectations, and perceptions of fairness; when fathers' actual involvement falls short of the mothers' expectations, the fertility intentions of the mothers and the progression towards second-parity fertility decline (Aassve et al., 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2013; Riederer et al., 2019).

Finally, current empirical trends challenge the empirical foundation of gender role symmetry. Nordic countries—formerly the model case for how institutional adjustments and gender role change act to stabilise fertility rates—have seen a renewed decline in fertility rates since around 2010 in terms of both tempo and quantum (Hellstrand et al., 2021). This renewed fertility slump, which has been driven largely by falling first-parity birthrates (but also by lower second-parity birthrates), illustrates that institutional adjustments and male involvement in household work are insufficient in terms of facilitating a sustained recovery. Complementary explanations are offered by neoclassical theory, which highlights the importance of the stability of income, employment, and housing, etc. (Becker, 1991). In addition, uncertainty frameworks, such as the Narrative Framework (Vignoli et al., 2020), demonstrate that fertility can be depressed by objective precarity (such as expensive housing and the cost of living), as well as subjective perceptions of socioeconomic risk (Matysiak et al., 2021; Vignoli et al., 2020).

Although the relationship between fathers' involvement in household work and fertility has been debated intensively, the evidence base regarding post-socialist countries remains limited; moreover, the heterogeneity of post-socialist countries has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged. Belarus provides a critical case for revisiting theoretical expectations surrounding fathers' involvement in household tasks. In contrast to other post-socialist countries, Belarus has stable marriage rates and high first-parity fertility; however, it struggles with second-parity transition and high divorce rates, which are of particular relevance with regard to men's involvement in household tasks. Moreover, since Belarus provides universal institutional childcare, the effects of fathers' involvement in childcare can be more easily isolated from those of institutional childcare, which is beneficial in terms of comparing the role of fathers' involvement in housework and childcare.

Existing theories and evidence suggest that the analysis of fathers' involvement in household tasks and fertility intentions should differentiate between their involvement in childcare and housework, and that the fertility intentions of mothers and fathers should be considered separately. In addition to fathers' involvement and sociodemographic factors, the analysis must also account for alternative explanatory factors associated with economic well-being and uncertainty, and gender attitudes. These factors led to the definition of the following research question:

> What relationship, if any, exists between fathers' involvement in childcare and housework tasks and the short-term fertility intentions of mothers and fathers in Belarus when controlling for sociodemographic factors, economic well-being and uncertainty, and gender attitudes?

4. Research Design

4.1. Data and Methodology

The author relied on data obtained from the international GGS when addressing the research question posed in the study. The GGS comprises comparative surveys of nationally representative samples of the resident population aged 18 to 79 in each of the participating countries. Respondents are interviewed face-to-face and provide information on themselves, their partners, children, parents, other household members, and social networks. A detailed description of the design, scope, and aims of the survey can be found in Gauthier et al. (2023) and Vikat et al. (2007).

The first GGS wave in Belarus was conducted in 2017 (Sakalova & Rotman, 2020). The final sample comprised 9,996 men and women aged 18 to 79. A number of data quality risks were evident, e.g., the estimated average non-response rate was 24% since the fieldwork phase overlapped with the summer vacation season, and the household addresses sampled were derived from the national census of 2009 since no more recent census data were available. Nevertheless, to date, this dataset remains the only cross-national survey to be conducted in Belarus on the socio-demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of individuals, as well as their fertility intentions and gender indicators, including gender attitudes and behaviour related to housework and childcare at the time of the interview. While no comparable analyses are available for Belarus, research in Scandinavian and Baltic countries has confirmed that the fertility data in the GGS are consistent with those from the HFD and estimates by the United Nations (Leocádio et al., 2023).

The sample was restricted to GGS respondents aged 18 to 45 who were in a partnership, had at least one co-resident child under the age of 14, and reported being fertile but not pregnant at the time of the survey. The age restriction was selected since parents aged over 45 have typically already realised their fertility intentions in the context of the early first childbearing, low-to-no second childbearing regime in Belarus. Respondents with co-resident children were considered to be mothers or fathers so as to account for those respondents who are in a partnership with a divorced parent with one co-resident child. This choice was informed by the high divorce rate in Belarus. Both partners in step-families often expressed enhanced intentions to have a shared biological child (Thomson, 2004; Vikat et al., 1999): 4.9% of the female respondents and 8.2% of the male respondents in the sub-sample had just one step-child and 1.7% of the female respondents and 2.2% of the male respondents had two or three step-children.

Descriptive statistics were applied aimed at assessing the differences in short-term fertility intentions between sociodemographic subgroups, and binomial logistic regression was employed to examine the extent to which various sociodemographic characteristics were associated with fertility intentions. Separate analyses were conducted for mothers and fathers to account for gender-differentiated associations. The final sample comprised $n = 804$ mothers and $n = 662$ fathers.

4.2. Measurement of the Variables

The analysis considered short-term fertility intentions, the distribution of childcare and housework tasks, the respondent's age, the number of co-resident children, educational status, household income, own employment status and that of the partner, and gender value orientation and attitudes.

4.2.1. Dependent Variable

Short-term fertility intentions: Given that the results from only one wave of the GGS in Belarus are available to date, fertility intentions were considered to serve as the best available proxy indicator for actual fertility behaviour. The vast majority of fertility research recognises fertility intentions as a strong predictor of actual fertility behaviour (Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003; Testa & Toulemon, 2006; Westoff & Ryder, 1977). Nevertheless, it is important to understand the limitations of this proxy. Fertility intentions are subject to revision, and their realisation is often contingent on family networks, demographic factors such as age and parity, and socioeconomic factors such as education, income, and employment status (Balbo & Mills, 2011; Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003; Régnier-Loilier et al., 2011). Childbearing intentions were elicited in the GGS via the following question: Do you intend to have another child during the next three years? The five possible responses were: (1) *definitely not*, (2) *probably not*, (3) *I am not sure*, (4) *probably yes*, and (5) *definitely yes*. The two negative responses were recoded into (0) *no*, and the two positive responses into (1) *yes*, to enable the more meaningful interpretation of the odds of having positive short-term fertility intentions in the logit model results. In the end, 27.4% of mothers and 35.0% of fathers in the restricted sample stated their intention to have another child within the next three years.

Respondents who replied *I am not sure* were excluded since they did not report clear fertility intentions and, therefore, comprised an analytically ambiguous category. Furthermore, the exclusion of "uncertain" responses enhanced the degree of comparability with previous fertility research, while exerting only a limited impact on the final sample size—this category consisted of only a small proportion of the initial dataset (16%).

4.2.2. Independent Variables

Childcare and housework tasks: Fathers' involvement in childcare and housework was measured via the question: Please tell me who does the following tasks in your household. The analysis of childcare tasks included all three items that were available in the dataset, regardless of the child's age: "dressing the children or seeing that the children are properly dressed," "staying at home with the children when they are ill," and "playing with the children and/or taking part in leisure activities with them." The analysis of the housework tasks considered four items that were available in the dataset: "preparing daily meals," "vacuum-cleaning the house," "doing the laundry," and "organising joint social activities." These activities are traditionally performed by women in Belarus, akin to other post-socialist countries (Aassve et al., 2015; Fanelli & Profeta,

2021; Riederer et al., 2019), and are reported by the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (n.d.-e) as requiring the most time within the household. The possible answers for all the items were (1) *always me*, (2) *usually me*, (3) *me and my partner about equally*, (4) *usually my partner*, (5) *always my partner*, and (6) *always or usually someone else*. The items were recoded by assigning a value of (1) *woman* in cases where the female respondent or the male respondent's female partner always or usually performed the task, a value of (2) *both sexes equally* if the respondent and her/his partner shared the task equally, and a value of (3) *man* if the male respondent or the female respondent's male partner always or usually performed the task. Separate mean indices were subsequently created for childcare and housework tasks. With regard to the sub-sample of female respondents, 55.9% of women reported performing childcare tasks themselves, 43.1% reported sharing them with their partner, and 1.0% reported that their partner always or usually performed childcare tasks. A similar distribution was observed in the sub-sample of male respondents: 48.8% of men reported that their partner performed childcare tasks, 50.3% reported sharing them, and 0.9% reported doing childcare tasks themselves. Regarding housework tasks, around half of all the respondents reported that the woman performed them primarily on her own (52.7% for the female sub-sample and 61.5% for the male sub-sample). In the end, 47.0% of women and 37.0% of men reported sharing such tasks with their partner. The respondents in both sub-samples indicated that men performed only a very small share of housework tasks themselves (0.3% for the female sub-sample and 1.5% for the male sub-sample).

Since men tend to overestimate their level of involvement in the performance of household tasks (Kiger & Riley, 1996) and the GGS relies on self-reporting without interviewing the partners, the risk of bias arises in the data. While this factor has implications in terms of the interpretability of the data, it is not inherently problematic with concern to the analysis, given that individual perceptions of the division of household work and their congruence with gender values are more relevant for fertility than the actual, unbiased division of labour (Riederer et al., 2008, 2019).

4.2.3. Control Variables

Regarding age: Respondents were divided into three age categories: (a) 18–25 years; (b) 26–35 years; (c) 36–45 years. It was expected that the highest age category would be negatively associated with fertility intentions, given the minimal tempo effect on fertility in Belarus in recent decades, which implies that intended fertility has, in most cases, been reached by the age of 36 (Ishchanova, 2022). The distribution of age and the other control variables is reported in the Supplementary File.

The number of co-resident children was categorised as follows: (a) one child; (b) two children; (c) more than two children. It was expected that the number of co-resident children would be negatively associated with fertility intentions since higher parity acts to close the gap to desired parity, while it also influences the intensity of childcare and housework tasks.

A three-level categorical variable was applied for educational attainment. The lower category comprised individuals with a lower secondary education, the middle category those who had completed an upper secondary education and a post-secondary but non-tertiary education, and the third category those who had completed a tertiary education. The ambiguous effect of education was anticipated: while a higher education potentially increases the household income of women and reduces the degree of economic uncertainty, which potentially positively affects their fertility (Perelli-Harris, 2005), it may also act to

increase the opportunity costs of having an additional child (Amialchuk et al., 2014). Conversely, the attainment of higher education by men may act to reduce the opportunity costs for women of having another child. Lower male educational levels were expected to be associated with higher fertility intentions since lower-educated men are more likely to support traditional norms that favour larger families, and face lower opportunity costs concerning childbearing (Axinn & Barber, 2001; Tragaki & Bagavos, 2014); moreover, they tend to enter partnerships and fatherhood at earlier ages.

The self-assessed ability of respondents to make ends meet was also considered, as recoded into three categories: (a) difficult (respondents who can make ends meet with difficulty or with great difficulty), (b) somewhat difficult (respondents who can make ends meet with some difficulty or fairly easily), and (c) easy (respondents who can make ends meet easily or fairly easily). This variable was included since economic constraints are the most frequently cited reason for the decline in fertility and since the Belarusian government's family policy measures focus predominantly on the provision of financial benefits. The subjective self-assessment of the household economic situation better reflects perceived financial constraints than reported income, tends to yield less missing data, and relies on the overall perception of respondents, thus reducing the measurement error (Lačný, 2020; OECD, 2013; Whelan & Maitre, 2009). Moreover, previous research has shown that subjective economic well-being is often more strongly associated with fertility intentions than objective income since it captures how the financial capacity of individuals is related to their expectations of the costs of raising additional children (Philipov, 2009; Testa & Basten, 2014; Vignoli et al., 2020).

Three categories were considered with respect to determining how employment status is related to fertility intentions: (a) employed (respondents who indicated that they were employed, helping a family member on a family farm, engaged in business, or self-employed), (b) not employed (respondents who indicated that they were unemployed, homemakers, or students in school or vocational training), and (c) respondents on parental leave (i.e., maternity leave or parental leave). It was expected that female employment would be negatively associated and male employment would be positively associated with fertility intentions.

The employment status of the partner used the same categories as above: (a) employed, (b) not employed, and (c) respondents on parental leave. This variable was included to account for gender-differentiated labour market participation.

On value orientations and attitudes, the following statements were considered concerning the roles of men and women: For whom is having a job more important, men or women? For whom is looking after children more important, men or women? Whose task is it to look after the home and children, men or women? Whose task is it to earn money for the family, men or women? A variable was then created from these four statements with the following categories: (a) women (respondents who answered "women, definitely" and "women, slightly"), (b) both sexes equally, and (c) men (respondents who answered "men, definitely" and "men, slightly"). It was expected that gender-egalitarian views on the participation of women in the labour market would be negatively associated with fertility intentions and that gender-egalitarian views on men's involvement in household tasks would be positively associated with fertility intentions in line with the expert literature on gender-egalitarian values (Aassve et al., 2015; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015).

In addition to the bivariate correlations and the logit regressions, robustness and sensitivity analyses were conducted aimed at testing the stability of the analysis results. Each input variable was excluded from the mean index from which the independent variable "housework tasks" was derived, while the other input variables were retained so as to test for heterogeneities based on how the construct of the men's involvement in housework was defined. Secondly, the self-assessed economic situation was replaced by the income in order to account for potential differences between perceived and objective economic well-being. Thirdly, additional analyses were conducted in which either respondents aged 18–25 or respondents aged 36–45 were excluded. Fourthly, respondents with step-children were excluded; thus, only those respondents with co-resident biological children were considered. The tendencies remained robust with respect to housework tasks, childcare tasks, and socio-economic characteristics across all the iterations, with one notable exception: No significant associations were observed in the sub-sample of male respondents after removing respondents aged 36–45 from the sample. Furthermore, aimed at enhancing the understanding of the data used in the analysis, the sex-specific frequencies of all the dependent, independent, and control variables are provided in the Supplementary File.

4.3. Limitations

The design and the results of this study must be understood in the context of its limitations. Perhaps most importantly, the study relies on 2017 data since no more recent data has yet been published. More recent developments in fertility and in the wider policy and socio-economic environment are, therefore, not considered in the study. Secondly, since the second wave of GGS data is not yet available, it was not possible to conduct a longitudinal analysis. Thus, the study was limited to examining associations rather than causality, and fertility intentions rather than fertility. Thirdly, although the sample is nationally representative, some of the subgroup cell sizes were relatively small. This pertained in particular to men who usually or always do childcare or housework tasks. Since small cell sizes may act to reduce the precision of estimates, this factor should be considered when interpreting the results. Finally, the data used for the analysis may be subject to bias since the GGS relies on self-reported measures. Although previous research has highlighted that individual perceptions may in fact be more relevant in terms of fertility than objective measures (Riederer et al., 2008, 2019), it follows that the variables included in the study, e.g., those on the distribution of household work or the self-assessed economic situation, may not fully reflect objective reality.

5. Empirical Results

A summary of the analysis results is provided in Table 1. Separate analyses were conducted for the male and female respondents. The dependent variable comprised short-term fertility intentions, with the reference category set to those respondents who intended to have another child. The main independent variables comprised childcare and housework tasks, whereas demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and gender values were included as control variables. The left column of each analysis represents bivariate correlations between short-term intentions to have another child and the independent and control variables; the numbers represent the percentage of respondents with a given condition who have fertility intentions. The right column of each analysis presents the logistic regression results; the numbers represent the odds of having fertility intentions.

The descriptive statistics indicated that 19.7% of mothers who engaged in housework alone had short-term fertility intentions compared to 36.3% of mothers who shared the housework tasks with their partner and 0.0% of mothers whose partner was exclusively responsible for performing housework tasks; 48.6% of mothers in the youngest age group had short-term fertility intentions compared with 37.2% in the middle age group and 10.1% in the highest age group. A similar distribution was observed for the fathers: 66.7% of fathers in the youngest age group, 52.3% in the middle age group, and 16.2% in the highest age group had short-term fertility intentions. Around half of the mothers and fathers with one co-resident child had short-term fertility intentions to have another child compared to 10.9% of mothers and 16.8% of fathers who had two co-resident children, and 6.9% of mothers and 8.7% of fathers who had three or more co-resident children; 16.7% of mothers with a low education level, 26.2% with a medium education level, and 31.6% with a high education level had short-term fertility intentions. With regard to the self-assessed economic situation, 22.9% of mothers and 25.2% of fathers with a difficult economic situation, 27.0% of mothers and 36.8% of fathers with a somewhat difficult situation, and 39.7% of mothers and 42.0% of fathers with an easy economic situation had short-term fertility intentions. About 29.4% of fathers intended to have another child if their partner was employed, compared to 37.0% whose partner was not employed and 45.0% whose partner was on parental leave. With respect to value orientations and attitudes, 53.8% of fathers who reported that it is the task of women to earn money for the family had short-term fertility intentions compared to 39.3% of fathers who reported that it is the task of men to earn money for the family and 24.5% of fathers who reported that it is the task of both men and women to earn money for the family.

The results obtained from the logistic regression models validated most of the tendencies detected in the descriptive statistics. Being exclusively responsible for childcare tasks was positively associated with the fertility intentions of the fathers (OR = 13.68), whereas the shared involvement of mothers and fathers in household tasks was positively associated with the short-term fertility intentions of the mothers (OR = 2.33).

Secondly, sociodemographic characteristics were confirmed to be strong predictors of short-term fertility intentions for both genders. The fathers and mothers aged 36–45 exhibited lower odds of having fertility intentions than the fathers and mothers aged 18–25. Likewise, the more children parents already had, the lower their odds of having fertility intentions. In addition, the mothers have lower odds of having short-term fertility intentions if they were currently on parental leave than employed mothers (OR = 0.59) and if their partner was not employed compared to having an employed partner (OR = 0.32). In contrast, those fathers who had a partner on parental leave exhibited higher odds of short-term fertility intentions than fathers whose partner was employed (OR = 1.76). Having a high level of education reduced the odds of having fertility intentions for the fathers compared to the fathers with a low level of education (OR = 0.52).

Thirdly, the self-assessed household economic situation was positively associated with the fertility intentions of the fathers: the odds of reporting short-term fertility intentions were higher for those with a somewhat difficult economic situation (OR = 1.97) and those with an easy situation (OR = 3.44) than for fathers who reported difficulty with making ends meet. Furthermore, the fathers who stated that it is the task of both women and men to earn money for the family tended to exhibit lower odds of having positive fertility intentions than those fathers who reported that this is the task of women.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations and odds ratios of intentions to have another child in the next three years in Belarus, by sex.

	Females		Males	
	Descriptive statistics	Logistic regression	Descriptive statistics	Logistic regression
	%	OR	%	OR
Childcare tasks				
Woman	26.2	1 [Ref.]	36.5	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	29.6	0.85	33.7	0.90
Man	0.0	0.00	33.3	13.68*
Housework tasks				
Woman	19.7	1 [Ref.]	34.1	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	36.3	2.33***	37.5	0.95
Man	0.0***	0.96	10.0	0.15
Age group (in years)				
18–25	48.6	1 [Ref.]	66.7	1 [Ref.]
26–35	37.2	1.23	52.3	1.05
36–45	10.1***	0.19***	16.2***	0.28*
Number of co-resident children				
1	53.1	1 [Ref.]	59.4	1 [Ref.]
2	10.9	0.11***	16.8	0.14***
3 or more	6.9***	0.07***	8.7**	0.05***
Education				
Low	16.7	1 [Ref.]	35.2	1 [Ref.]
Medium	26.2	1.44	35.1	0.64
High	31.6**	1.31	34.9	0.52*
Self-assessed household economic situation				
Difficult	22.9	1 [Ref.]	25.2	1 [Ref.]
Somewhat difficult	27.0	1.25	36.8	1.97*
Easy	39.7*	1.35	42.0*	3.44**
Employment status				
Employed	27.5	1 [Ref.]	35.3	1 [Ref.]
Not employed	29.2	0.56	32.3	0.80
On parental leave	27.1	0.59*	0.0	0.00
Employment status of partner				
Employed	27.9	1 [Ref.]	29.4	1 [Ref.]
Not employed	16.7	0.32*	37.0	1.58
On parental leave	25.0	1.83	45.0***	1.76*

Table 1. (Cont.) Bivariate correlations and odds ratios of intentions to have another child in the next three years in Belarus, by sex.

	Females		Males	
	Descriptive statistics	Logistic regression	Descriptive statistics	Logistic regression
	%	OR	%	OR
Value orientations and attitudes				
For whom is having a job more important				
Women	38.5	1 [Ref.]	41.7	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	25.1	0.54	32.5	1.44
Men	30.8	0.82	38.1	1.18
For whom is looking after children more important				
Women	29.4	1 [Ref.]	35.3	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	25.0	0.81	34.6	1.21
Men	50.0+	2.68	40.0	1.79
Whose task is it to look after the home and children				
Women	27.9	1 [Ref.]	38.5	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	26.8	1.17	32.7	0.73
Men	33.3	0.94	40.6	0.81
Whose task is it to earn money for the family				
Women	18.8	1 [Ref.]	53.8	1 [Ref.]
Both sexes equally	24.0	1.25	24.5	0.28+
Men	29.6	1.55	39.3***	0.58
n	804	804	662	662
Nagelkerke pseudo R2		0.44		0.43

Source: Author's calculations based on the 2017 wave of the GGS for Belarus. Note: The values of p(Chi2) for the descriptive statistics are reported next to the final category of variables: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Fathers' involvement in household tasks is widely acknowledged as an important—though contested—factor in the analysis of fertility intentions. The case of Belarus provides an opportunity to revisit expectations surrounding the role of men's involvement in fertility transitions from first to second parity, given that the country's fertility dynamics are characterised by high first-parity fertility, low second-parity fertility, and only moderate postponement, or tempo effects, and that universal institutional childcare is provided. This study examined whether and how fathers' involvement in childcare and housework tasks is related to mothers' and fathers' intention to have another child, employing GGS data from Belarus. The study controlled for sociodemographic characteristics, economic well-being, and gender values. The analysis revealed that fathers' involvement in housework tasks was positively associated with the fertility intentions of the mothers but not of the fathers. Conversely, the exclusive responsibility of fathers for childcare tasks was

positively associated with the fertility intentions of the fathers but not of the mothers. The results of the study also showed that the self-assessed household economic situation was positively associated with the fertility intentions of the fathers and that those mothers whose partner was unemployed were less likely to have fertility intentions. Gender values were not statistically significantly associated with fertility intentions.

The results support the core claim of the Multiple Equilibrium Framework that fathers' involvement in household tasks has the potential to increase fertility intentions (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000). However, they also challenge the assumption that gender-role symmetry drives fertility and fertility intentions. Instead, the findings provide support for alternative explanations, i.e., that the relationship between fathers' involvement and fertility is contingent upon the type of household task and whose fertility intentions are being analysed (Neyer et al., 2013; Riederer et al., 2019). Since housework is usually seen as less enjoyable than childcare, the fertility intentions of mothers increased when the fathers were involved in housework (Koster et al., 2022; Poortman & Van Der Lippe, 2009; Sullivan, 2013). The finding that fathers who are solely responsible for childcare are more likely to intend to have another child can be read in either of two ways: Either their engagement in childcare influences their intention to have another child, or their engagement in childcare is influenced by their intention to have another child. Though more research is required so as to form a more complete understanding of the nature of this relationship, it is consistent with the analysis conducted by Leocádio et al. (2024) in other countries.

Furthermore, the results suggest that fathers' involvement, though relevant, is not able to sufficiently explain fertility intentions in Belarus. The significance of the self-assessed household economic situation and of male unemployment suggests that economic well-being and uncertainty play an important role, in line with neoclassical theory after Becker (1991) and the literature on socioeconomic uncertainty (Matysiak et al., 2021; Vignoli et al., 2020). This finding corroborates the finding of Amialchuk et al. (2014) that economic well-being and stability are important in terms of fertility in Belarus.

In the Belarusian context, the study findings illustrate that while the universal provision of childcare may act as an important institutional adjustment that reduces the workload of women (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; McDonald, 2000), the double burden borne by women with regard to housework continues to act as a barrier to fertility. This finding is consistent with emerging evidence from other countries (Leocádio et al., 2024). Institutional childcare alone is unable to offset this imbalance. Since women spend more than twice as much time as men on household work, and greater male involvement in household work increases the fertility intentions of women, the findings of the study suggest that there is an insufficiency of strong political and cultural mechanisms in place that serve to normalise fathers' involvement in domestic work (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2020; Saxonberg, 2014). Furthermore, the study highlights that economic insecurity and uncertainty continue to act as structural constraints on fertility in Belarus, for which child allowances do not sufficiently compensate (Amialchuk et al., 2014; Sharilova & Bandarenka, 2022; UDF.BY, 2021).

Two important policy recommendations were derived from the study. Firstly, policymakers should promote fathers' involvement in housework tasks. Given the seemingly important role of this factor, related policy measures should include both paid parental leave and employment law regulations that limit working hours so that fathers have more time to tend to their family duties, accompanied by social behavioural change campaigns. Policy measures aimed at promoting behavioural change among men and young people to support

women in the household could also play a valuable role in this respect. Secondly, family policy should be embedded within a wider welfare regime that aims to increase socioeconomic well-being and certainty among young parents, including, for example, increasing the minimum wage and providing affordable housing options.

Funding

The publication of this article was funded by the Department of Demography and Geodemography, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Czech Republic.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

This article uses data from the GGP data archive on the 2020 Generations and Gender Survey, Belarus, wave 1 (see Sakalova & Rotman, 2020). The data can be accessed under the following link: https://ggp.colectica.org/item/int.ggp/eb4823d8-30b2-44df-8541-2d68ea91b55c/1. Further details and methodological notes on the data and the underlying survey can be found in Gauthier et al. (2023) and Vikat et al. (2007), as well as on the GGP website: https://www.ggp-i.org

Supplementary Material

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

References

Aassve, A., Fuochi, G., Mencarini, L., & Mendola, D. (2015). What is your couple type? Gender ideology, housework-sharing, and babies. *Demographic Research*, *32*, 835–858.

Allison, C., & Ringold, D. (1996). *Labor markets in transition in Central and Eastern Europe, 1989–1995* (Vol. 352). World Bank Publications.

Amialchuk, A., Lisenkova, K., Salnykov, M., & Yemelyanau, M. (2014). Economic determinants of fertility in Belarus: A micro-data analysis. *Economics of Transition*, *22*(3), 577–604.

Ananyeu, D., Asanovich, A., Darafeyeva, A., Polevikova, V., Salvinskaya, V., & Yahorava, H. (2013). *Participation of women in public and political life: Belarus* (Country Report). East-European School of Political Studies. https://rm.coe.int/1680599095

Artemenko, E. (2016*). Faktori reproduktivnogo vibora belorusov* (Working Paper No. 2). Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Axinn, W. G., & Barber, J. S. (2001). Mass education and fertility transition. *American Sociological Review*, *66*(4), 481–505.

Balbo, N., & Mills, M. (2011). The effects of social capital and social pressure on the intention to have a second or third child in France, Germany, and Bulgaria, 2004–05. *Population Studies*, *65*(3), 335–351.

Becker, G. S. (1991). *A treatise on the family*. Harvard University Press.

Bobrova, A., Piliutsik, A., In, G., & Yuan, G. (2019). Birth control in Belarus and China: Current policy. *Economy and Sociology*, *2019*(1), 87–99.

Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus. (2016). *Gosudarstvenaya programa "Zdorovie naroda i demographicheskaya bezopasnost Respubliki Belarus" na 2016–2020 godi*. Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus.

Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus. (2021). *Gosudarstvenaya programa "Zdorovie naroda i*

demographicheskaya bezopasnost Respubliki Belarus" na 2021–2025 godi. Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus.

Dommermuth, L., Hohmann-Marriott, B., & Lappegård, T. (2017). Gender equality in the family and childbearing. *Journal of Family Issues*, *38*(13), 1803–1824.

Esping-Andersen, G., & Billari, F. C. (2015). Re-theorizing family demographics. *Population and Development Review*, *41*(1), 1–31.

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.

Fodor, E., Glass, C., Kawachi, J., & Popescu, L. (2002). Family policies and gender in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *35*, 475–490.

Frejka, T. (2008). Overview Chapter 5: Determinants of family formation and childbearing during the societal transition in Central and Eastern Europe. *Demographic Research*, *19*, 139–170.

Frejka, T., & Sobotka, T. (2008). Overview Chapter 1: Fertility in Europe—Diverse, delayed and below replacement. *Demographic Research*, *19*, 15–46.

Gauthier, A. H., Kong, S., Grünwald, O., Bujard, M., Caporali, A., Deimantas, V. J., Emery, T., Jablonski, W., Koops, J., Rijken, A., & Schumann, A. (2023). *Data brief: The generations and gender survey second round (GGS-II)*. GGP. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10220746

Goldscheider, F., Bernhardt, E., & Brandén, M. (2013). Domestic gender equality and childbearing in Sweden. *Demographic Research*, *29*, 1097–1126.

Goldscheider, F., Bernhardt, E., & Lappegård, T. (2015). The gender revolution: A framework for understanding changing family and demographic behavior. *Population and Development Review*, *41*(2), 207–239.

Hellstrand, J., Nisén, J., Miranda, V., Fallesen, P., Dommermuth, L., & Myrskylä, M. (2021). Not just later, but fewer: Novel trends in cohort fertility in the Nordic countries. *Demography*, *58*(4), 1373–1399.

Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. Viking.

Human Fertility Database. (2021). *Belarus* [Data set]. https://www.humanfertility.org/Country/Country?cntr=BLR&lastUpdate=20210422

Ishchanova, K. (2022). Home alone: Exploring childcare options to remove barriers to second childbearing in Belarus. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(3), 112–123.

Kiger, G., & Riley, P. J. (1996). Gender differences in perceptions of household labor. *The Journal of Psychology*, *130*(4), 357–370.

Kłysiński, K. (2023, October 17). *A depopulating country: Belarus's demographic situation* (OSW Commentary No. 520). Centre for Eastern Studies. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-10-17/a-depopulating-country-belaruss-demographic-situation?page=0

Kohler, H. P., Billari, F. C., & Ortega, J. A. (2002). The emergence of lowest-low fertility in Europe during the 1990s. *Population and Development Review*, *28*(4), 641–680.

Koster, T., Poortman, A.-R., Van Der Lippe, T., & Kleingeld, P. (2022). Fairness perceptions of the division of household labor: Housework and childcare. *Journal of Family Issues*, *43*(3), 679–702.

Lačný, M. (2020). Approaches to subjective poverty in economic and sociological research. *Human Affairs*, *30*(3), 413–427.

Lebid, M. (2021). *Childcare policies and gender equality in the post-soviet Eastern European countries* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Central European University. https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2021/lebid_maryna.pdf

Leocádio, V., Gauthier, A. H., Mynarska, M., & Costa, R. (2023). The quality of fertility data in the web-based Generations and Gender Survey. *Demographic Research*, *49*, 31–46.

Leocádio, V., Verona, A. P., & Wajnman, S. (2024). Exploring the association between gender equality in

the family and fertility intentions: An explanation of the findings in low-fertility countries. *Genus*, *80*(1), Article 26.

Matysiak, A. (2009). Employment first, then childbearing: Women's strategy in post-socialist Poland. *Population Studies*, *63*(3), 253–276.

Matysiak, A., Sobotka, T., & Vignoli, D. (2021). The great recession and fertility in Europe: A sub-national analysis. *European Journal of Population*, *37*(1), 29–64.

McDonald, P. (2000). Gender equity in theories of fertility transition. *Population and Development Review*, *26*(3), 427–439.

Mencarini, L., & Tanturri, M. L. (2004). Time use, family role-set and childbearing among Italian working women. Genus, *60*(1), 111–137.

Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus. (2011). *Postanovlenie No. 201: Ob utverzhdenii Polozheniya o gruppakh prodlennogo dnya uchrezhdeniy obrazovaniya, realizuyushchikh obrazovatelnye programmy obshchego srednego obrazovaniya*.

Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Ministry of Healthcare, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Culture, & Minsk Regional Executive Committee. (2011). *Nacionalnaya programa demographicheskoy bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus na 2011–2015 godi*.

Myrskylä, M., Kohler, H.-P., & Billari, F. C. (2011). *High development and fertility: Fertility at older reproductive ages and gender equality explain the positive link* (Working Paper No. WP-2011-017). Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. https://doi.org/10.4054/MPIDR-WP-2011-017

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.-a). *Marriages, divorces and crude marriage and divorce rates*. https://belstat.gov.by/en/ofitsialnaya-statistika/Demographic-and-social-statistics/population-and-migration/vital-statistics/annual-data/marriages-divorces-and-crude-marriage-and-divorce-rates

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.-b). *Total fertility rate*. https://gender.belstat.gov.by/demography/31?type=table&reg=(F):(T)

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.-c). *Average age of female at first childbirth*. https://gender.belstat.gov.by/demography/32?type=lineChart&reg=(F):(T)

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.-d). *Share of time spent on household (unpaid work)*. https://gender.belstat.gov.by/economics/73?type=pieChart2&reg=(T/F/M):(T):(T):(T)

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.-e). *How we use our time*. https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial_statistika/time_eng.pdf

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (2019). *Education in the Republic of Belarus*. https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/78b/78bd508ae57d14b1772e94903ba90b80.pdf

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (2020). *Labour and employment in the Republic of Belarus. Statistical book*. https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/97e/97e9d257e0d9bb1c5f9b1b1071c116ca.pdf

National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. (2024). *Employment in the Republic of Belarus*. https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial_statistika/2024/zanyatost_bezrabotica_2024-en.pdf

Neyer, G., Lappegård, T., & Vignoli, D. (2013). Gender equality and fertility: Which equality matters? *European Journal of Population/Revue Européenne de Démographie*, *29*(3), 245–272.

OECD. (2013). *OECD guidelines on measuring subjective well-being*. http://doi.org/10.1787/9789264191655-en

Oláh, L. S. (2003). Gendering fertility: Second births in Sweden and Hungary. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *22*, 171–200.

Oláh, L. S., & Bernhardt, E. (2008). Sweden: Combining childbearing and gender equality. *Demographic Research*, *19*, 1105–1144.

Pascall, G., & Manning, N. (2000). Gender and social policy: comparing welfare states in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *10*(3), 240–266.

Pastore, F., & Verashchagina, A. (n.d.). *On female labour force participation and their job remuneration in transition: Evidence from Belarus*. Unpublished manuscript.

Perelli-Harris, B. (2005). The path to lowest-low fertility in Ukraine. *Population Studies*, *59*(1), 55–70.

Philipov, D. (2009). Fertility intentions and outcomes: The role of policies to close the gap. *European Journal of Population/Revue Européenne de Démographie*, *25*, 355–361.

Pinnelli, A., & Fiori, F. (2008). The influence of partner involvement in fatherhood and domestic tasks on mothers fertility expectations in Italy. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research & Practice about Men as Fathers*, *6*(2), 169–191.

Poortman, A. R., & Van Der Lippe, T. (2009). Attitudes toward housework and child care and the gendered division of labor. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *71*(3), 526–541.

Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus. (2025). *State support for families in the Republic of Belarus*. https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/social/social-protection/family-life

Quesnel-Vallée, A., & Morgan, S. P. (2003). Missing the target? Correspondence of fertility intentions and behavior in the US. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *22*, 497–525.

Raybould, A., & Sear, R. (2021). Children of the (gender) revolution: A theoretical and empirical synthesis of how gendered division of labour influences fertility. *Population Studies*, *75*(2), 169–190.

Régnier-Loilier, A., Vignoli, D., & Dutreuilh, C. (2011). Fertility intentions and obstacles to their realization in France and Italy. *Population*, *66*(2), 361–389.

Riederer, B., Buber-Ennser, I., & Brzozowska, Z. (2019). Fertility intentions and their realization in couples: How the division of household chores matters. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(13), 1860–1882.

Riederer, B., Mikula, G., & Bodi, O. (2008). *Professional and familial work loads, relationship satisfaction and well-being: The mediating role of subjective work loads and perceived justice of the division of family work* (Research Report No. 1). FWF Austrian Science Fund. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/253040217_Professional_and_Familial_Work_Loads_Relationship_Satisfaction_and_Well-being_The_Mediating_Role_of_Subjective_Work_Loads_and_Perceived_Justice_of_the_Division_of_Family_Work

Sakalova, M., & Rotman, D. (2020). *Generations and Gender Survey 2020 Belarus Wave 1 (2017)* [Data set]. GGP Data Archive. https://www.ggp-i.org

Saxonberg, S. (2014). *Gendering family policies in post-communist Europe: A historical-institutional analysis*. Springer.

Shakhotko, L. P. (2008). Snizhenie rozhdaemosti kak glavnyi iz vyzovov demograficheskoi bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus. *Demoscope Weekly*, *2008*(327/328). https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2008/0327/analit02.php

Sharilova, E., & Bandarenka, A. (2022). The pronatalist policy in the Republic of Belarus against the background of global trends of declining fertility. *Research on Enterprise in Modern Economy*, *2*(35), 41–51.

Sobotka, T. (2003). Re-emerging diversity: Rapid fertility changes in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the communist regimes. *Population*, *58*(4), 451–486.

Social Security Administration. (2018). *Social security programs throughout the world: Europe, 2018—Belarus*. https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/progdesc/ssptw/2018-2019/europe/belarus.pdf

Spéder, Z., & Kapitány, B. (2014). Failure to realize fertility intentions: A key aspect of the post-communist fertility transition. *Population Research and Policy Review*, *33*(3), 393–418.

Steinbach, A., & Maslauskaitė, A. (2022). Childcare in Lithuania and Belarus: How gendered is parenting in Eastern European countries? *Journal of Family Studies*, *28*(3), 1181–1197.

Sullivan, O. (2013). What do we learn about gender by analyzing housework separately from child care? Some considerations from time-use evidence. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *5*(2), 72–84.

Sullivan, O., Billari, F. C., & Altintas, E. (2014). Fathers' changing contributions to child care and domestic work in very low–fertility countries: The effect of education. *Journal of Family Issues*, *35*(8), 1048–1065.

Szelewa, D., & Polakowski, M. P. (2008). Who cares? Changing patterns of childcare in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *18*(2), 115–131.

Szikra, D., & Szelewa, D. (2010). Do Central and Eastern European countries fit the "Western" picture? The example of family policies in Hungary and Poland. In C. Klenner & S. Leiber (Eds.), *Welfare states and gender inequality in Central and Eastern Europe*: *Continuity and post-socialist transformation in the EU member states* (pp. 81–116). European Trade Union Institute.

Testa, M. R., & Basten, S. (2014). Certainty of meeting fertility intentions declines in Europe during the 'Great Recession.' *Demographic Research*, *31*, 687–734.

Testa, M. R., & Toulemon, L. (2006). Family formation in France: Individual preferences and subsequent outcomes. *Vienna yearbook of population research*, *2006*, 41–75.

Thomson, E. (2004). Step-families and childbearing desires in Europe. *Demographic Research*, *3*, 117–134.

Tragaki, A., & Bagavos, C. (2014). Male fertility in Greece: Trends and differentials by education level and employment status. *Demographic Research*, *31*(6), 137–160.

UDF.BY. (2021, February 17). *Birth rate in Belarus keeps dropping despite numerous children allowances*. https://udf.name/english/soc/212068-birth-rate-in-belarus-keeps-dropping-despite-numerous-children-allowances.html

UNECE. (n.d.). *Mean age of women at birth of first child*. https://w3.unece.org/PXWeb/en/Table?IndicatorCode=34

van de Kaa, D. J. (2001). Postmodern fertility preferences: From changing value orientation to new behavior. *Population and Development Review*, *27*, 290–331.

Vignoli, D., Guetto, R., Bazzani, G., Pirani, E., & Minello, A. (2020). A reflection on economic uncertainty and fertility in Europe: The narrative framework. *Genus*, *76*(28), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-020-00094-3

Vikat, A., Spéder, Z., Pailhé, A., Pinnelli, A., Solaz, A., Beets, G. C. N., Billari, F., Bühler, C., Désesquelles, A., Fokkema, C. M., Hoem, J., MacDonald, A., & Neyer, G. (2007). Generations and Gender Survey: Towards a better understanding of relationships and processes in the life course. *Demographic Research*, *17*, 389–440.

Vikat, A., Thomson, E., & Hoem, J. M. (1999). Stepfamily fertility in contemporary Sweden: The impact of childbearing before the current union. *Population Studies*, *53*(2), 211–225.

Westoff, C. F., & Ryder, N. B. (1977). The predictive validity of reproductive intentions. *Demography*, *14*, 431–453.

Whelan, C. T., & Maitre, B. (2009). The 'Europeanisation' of reference groups: A reconsideration using EU-SILC. *European Societies*, *11*(2), 283–309.

Zeman, K., Beaujouan, É., Brzozowska, Z., & Sobotka, T. (2018). Cohort fertility decline in low fertility countries: Decomposition using parity progression ratios. *Demographic Research*, *38*, 651–690.

About the Author

Kamila Ishchanova is a PhD candidate at the Department of Demography and Geodemography at Charles University. Her research interests include fertility dynamics, fertility in low-fertility settings, population change, statistics, and empirical methods. In her dissertation, she examines fertility dynamics, their underlying explanatory factors, and pronatalist family policy options in Belarus.



SOCIAL INCLUSION
ISSN: 2183-2803

Social Inclusion is a peer-reviewed open access journal which provides academics and policymakers with a forum to discuss and promote a more socially inclusive society.

The journal encourages researchers to publish their results on topics concerning social and cultural cohesiveness, marginalized social groups, social stratification, minority-majority interaction, cultural diversity, national identity, and core-periphery relations, while making significant contributions to the understanding and enhancement of social inclusion worldwide.

cogitatio

www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion