

1. Introduction and Research Focus

Who takes care of the children – mothers or fathers? And who is satisfied with the existing arrangement? Although public discourse increasingly celebrates the ideal of “involved fatherhood,” everyday childcare practices remain deeply gendered. Fathers’ participation has become more visible in the rhetoric of equality, yet empirical evidence shows that mothers continue to bear the main burden of daily, time-intensive, and emotionally demanding care work.

This study examines the division of childcare labour between men and women in heterosexual partnerships across 13 European countries, using data from the second round of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGs-II, 2020 – 2024). It investigates both the distribution of specific childcare tasks and levels of satisfaction with the existing division of labour among men and women.

The analysis addresses two central questions: *Who actually performs childcare, and who is content with this arrangement?* Drawing on comparative survey data and gender-sociological theory, the study exposes the persistent gap between the ideal of equal parenting and the enduring reality of traditional caregiving roles.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research on family and gender relations consistently shows that fathers’ involvement in childcare remains selective and structured by gendered expectations. Doucet (2000) highlights that men’s caregiving tends to be concentrated in socially legitimized domains, while women undertake the invisible, repetitive, and emotionally demanding tasks of everyday care.

Similarly, Kotila et. al. (2013) find that in dual-earner families, mothers devote substantially more time than fathers to routine childcare and positive engagement, despite fathers’ expressed commitment to their infants. Fathers’ participation, while growing, remains constrained by work demands and cultural expectations.

Fanelli and Profeta (2021), analysing data from the first round of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGs-I), show that paternal involvement in family life correlates with fertility and maternal employment, yet changes often remain symbolic. They argue that while fathers’ participation in household labour fosters gender equality, direct childcare continues to be strongly feminized.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the gendered division of childcare reflects entrenched social norms rather than individual choice. The “involved father” ideal functions within cultural frameworks that continue to associate caregiving with femininity.

3. Data and Methods

This study uses data from Generations and Gender Survey (GGs-II, 2020 – 2024), a comparative longitudinal survey on family dynamics and gender roles. The sample includes respondents aged 18 – 49 living with a different-sex partner and at least one child in the household.

Thirteen European countries are analysed, representing diverse welfare regimes and cultural contexts:

- **Nordic countries:** Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark
- **Western Europe:** Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, United Kingdom
- **Central and Eastern Europe:** Estonia, Czechia, Croatia, Moldova

The GGS provides rich information on family organisation and the division of everyday responsibilities. Within this framework, five childcare activities were selected for analysis:

1. Dressing the child
2. Taking care of the child when ill
3. Playing with the child
4. Putting the child to bed
5. Helping the child with homework

Respondents indicated who usually performs each task. Answers were recoded into seven categories: *always woman*, *usually woman*, *both equally*, *usually man*, *always man*, *child does it themselves*, and *always or usually someone else*. This structure captures both gender asymmetries and degrees of delegation or child autonomy.

Respondents also rated their satisfaction with the division of childcare and household duties on a 0 – 10 scale. Weighted mean satisfaction scores for men and women were compared across countries to assess perceived fairness and equality.

The paper presents **descriptive comparative analyses** that highlight cross-country variations and similarities in childcare patterns. Although descriptive in nature, these results offer valuable insights into how structural and cultural contexts shape gendered parenting practices across Europe. All analyses were weighted using GGS sampling weights to ensure representativeness.

4. Findings

Across the thirteen countries, childcare remains distinctly gendered, though its degree varies. In nearly all contexts, mothers perform most daily and time-intensive tasks, while fathers' participation is concentrated in less demanding or more enjoyable activities. Men consistently report higher satisfaction with the existing division of labour, suggesting that unequal arrangements are often perceived as fair or acceptable by fathers.

The Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) display the most egalitarian patterns. Tasks such as putting children to bed, helping with homework, and playing are often shared, though mothers still dominate in dressing children and caring for them when ill. In Sweden and Finland, children's growing autonomy contributes to a modest reduction in gendered patterns, yet mothers remain primary caregivers. Satisfaction levels in the Nordic countries are high and relatively balanced, indicating that shared responsibilities enhance perceived fairness.

In Western Europe (the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom) gender gaps persist despite partial progress. The Netherlands and France show relatively equal participation in recreational and bedtime routines, yet mothers remain primarily responsible for care during illness and daily routines. Austria and Germany exhibit more traditional patterns, with "usually woman" as the prevailing category for nearly all tasks. The UK stands between these models: shared involvement is common, but mothers still predominate. Across these countries, men's satisfaction is notably higher than women's, with the largest disparities in Germany and Austria.

In Central and Eastern Europe (Estonia, Czechia, Croatia, and Moldova) the division of childcare is most traditional. Women overwhelmingly perform daily, physical, and emotional care, such as dressing children and tending to them when ill. Shared responsibility is mainly reported for play and homework, while male-dominated caregiving is nearly absent. Moldova shows the most unequal

division, with mothers almost always responsible for all five tasks. Despite these inequalities, both men and women report high satisfaction, with men's evaluations consistently higher, indicating that traditional arrangements remain culturally normalized.

Taken together, the data reveal a consistent pattern: egalitarian ideals of parenting have advanced in discourse and policy, yet everyday childcare remains highly gendered. Fathers' participation is visible but selective, centred on play and shared activities, while mothers shoulder the routine and invisible labour. Even in the most gender-equal contexts, caregiving becomes more unequal when children require physical or emotional care.

Satisfaction data reinforce these structural inequalities. Across all countries, men rate their satisfaction higher than women, regardless of how egalitarian or traditional the division is. The smallest gaps appear in Norway and Finland, while the largest are found in Central and Eastern Europe and conservative Western contexts such as Austria and Germany. Cultural expectations clearly shape perceptions of fairness: where traditional divisions persist, they are also more readily accepted.

Overall, fathers' involvement has increased symbolically, but the core structure of caregiving remains strongly gendered. Shared tasks are more common in societies with supportive family policies, yet traditional norms continue to underlie daily practices. The gender gap in satisfaction underscores that equality in childcare requires not only policy change but also a deeper cultural shift redefining caregiving as a shared social responsibility.

5. Discussion

The results confirm the persistence of gendered childcare across Europe. While fathers' visibility has grown, mothers continue to perform the invisible, repetitive, and emotional labour that sustains family life, while fathers focus on socially rewarded or discretionary tasks.

Policy interventions such as paternity leave or campaigns for "involved fatherhood" have brought incremental progress but no structural transformation. As Doucet (2000) notes, caregiving remains culturally coded as feminine work, and fathers' engagement is often framed as voluntary. Fanelli and Profeta (2021) emphasize that equality in family life depends not only on policy but also on cultural expectations and workplace norms. Without challenging beliefs about masculinity and care, progress will remain partial. The persistent satisfaction gap highlights that behavioural inequalities coexist with attitudinal ones: unequal arrangements continue to be experienced as legitimate by men and burdensome by women.

References

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