

# GENDER RESEARCH

DOI: 10.15838/sa.2023.1.37.5

UDC 314.15 | LBC 60.561.5

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## FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDCARE DURING PARENTAL LEAVE: ASSESSMENTS AND EXPANSION PROSPECTS



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*Modern social relationships imply strengthening of the values of equality, solidarity and justice in the division of responsibilities in the family sphere between women and men. However, it is women who bear the brunt of the housework in Russian families. Under such conditions, the need to develop a model of involved fatherhood that has a favorable effect on children, women, and fathers themselves becomes more relevant. In this regard, the purpose of our research is to examine fathers' involvement in family responsibilities during parental leave. To achieve this goal, in 2022 we conducted a questionnaire survey of mothers and fathers with children under 3 years old. We interviewed 1,000 respondents living in 85 entities of the RF. To organize the research, we used quota sampling, with quotas by Russian federal*

*districts in proportion to population size. We have revealed that with the expected higher level of parental load of mothers during the period of parental leave compared to the level of fathers' load, there are a number of socio-demographic factors influencing this differentiation. They include: 1) family income level (higher income is associated with specific types of functions – educational and communicative); 2) family status of fathers (having a registered marriage increases paternal involvement during parental leave). Fathers' age is not related to their involvement level. Reasons for fathers' lower load are both objective and subjective in nature. We see continuation of work in applying qualitative research methods for deeper understanding of the causes of the current situation.*

*Fathers' involvement, paternity leave, parental leave, childcare leave, family policy, involved fatherhood.*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation Grant 22-28-01847 (<https://rscf.ru/project/22-28-01847>).*

#### Introduction

Modern social relations imply a strengthening of the values of equality, solidarity and justice in the distribution of responsibilities in the family sphere between women and men. However, numerous researches of scientists show that most of the routine household work and childcare functions are performed by women, which leads to gender inequality. Thus, according to United Nations reports, on average, women spend three times as much time on unpaid housework as men<sup>1</sup>. Due to the lack of time to perform both professional and family tasks at once, women develop family-work conflict, leading to higher levels of stress (McCanlies et al., 2019), mental and physical health deterioration (Brauner et al., 2019). In this context, active fatherhood, associated with greater paternal involvement in child care and development, is seen as a factor in family well-being, involving a more even distribution of parental responsibilities between mother and father.

The problem of fatherhood began to attract researchers' attention relatively recently, in the 60s of the last century (Mikhailova, 2012). Before that the idea of a gender contract dominated in Russia and Western countries, according to which the man was the main breadwinner in the family, and the woman carried out the traditional role of "keeper of the home". In the late 1950s, a "family revolution" took place: the established gender order was transformed (Kohn,

2011). Women's activity in the economic sphere was increasing, and the patriarchal model of the family was gradually becoming a thing of the past. It was at this time that the need to reconsider the institution of fatherhood emerged. In the late 1960s the term "new fatherhood" (or "responsible fatherhood") came into scientific circulation, marking the emergence of a new type of father who is responsible for raising children on an equal footing with the mother (Rozhdestvenskaya, 2020).

In recent decades the phenomenon of fatherhood has been actively studied by domestic researchers. There are several types of modern fathers. The model of traditional fatherhood preserves the idea of a gendered division of roles: the man performs the function of protector and breadwinner, and the woman performs the duties of a "housewife" (Chernova, 2018). I.S. Kletsina also describes the model of the "absent father", which is characterized by the absence of any psychological contact with the child (Kletsina, 2009).

The alternative model of fatherhood is given different names in the domestic literature. For example, E.Yu. Rozhdestvenskaya identifies several types of "non-traditional fathers" (Rozhdestvenskaya, 2010). They include "modern breadwinner" who is actively involved in the life of his children along with the function of material support of the family, and "egalitarian father" who implements

<sup>1</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Progress and information, 2019). Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>

the duties in the professional and domestic spheres on a par with the mother. I.S. Kletsina uses the terms “responsible fathers” and “new fathers”. The former are actively involved in the process of taking care of children, but most of the parental load still falls on the mothers' shoulders. The latter share the household duties and functions of child rearing and development equally with their spouses (Kletsina, 2009). A.V. Avdeeva describes the phenomenon of modern fatherhood and uses the term “involved fathers” who actively participate in everyday childcare practices (Avdeeva, 2012). However, the author emphasizes that for such fathers, family is as important as work. Involved fathers have to optimize their time so as to seamlessly combine professional and family life.

The development of paternity issues has brought the issue of gender asymmetry in parenthood to the forefront: family policy in Russia is still primarily focused on mothers (Chernova, 2018). Fathers are usually given a secondary role in the process of raising children. However, despite the prevalence of more traditional parenting practices in Russia, there is, as in the West, an increase in paternal involvement (Beskaravainaya, 2006). One of the signs of increased paternalism can be seen, in particular, in the creation of so-called “dad schools” in the Russian Federation. First appearing in Sweden, this practice has spread to other countries. In Russia, “dad schools” exist in Saint Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Petrozavodsk, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the emergence of new fatherhood practices in Russia, researchers note that gender stereotypes about the roles of men and women prevalent in society hinder men's realization of their parental potential (Novoselov, 2012). The actual participation of men in the process of raising children has changed much less than public perceptions of how parental responsibilities should be distributed between spouses (Rozhdestvenskaya, 2020).

Meanwhile, research findings from various scholars suggest that fathers have notable potential to influence their children's development. First, fathers' active participation in childcare and parenting leads to increased

academic performance of children and is a factor in the development of high intellectual abilities (Cools et al., 2015). Second, it promotes children's emotional development (Henry et al., 2019). Third, when fathers become more involved with their children, the latter's health improves (Nandi et al., 2018). Fourth, children are more actively disciplined and learn rules of behavior better (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Finally, fathers' involvement in children's education reduces antisocial behavior, such as drug use and crime (Jethwani et al., 2014).

For women, the effects of fathers' involvement in parenthood are not only a more equal division of household work among parents and a lesser burden on mothers (Patnaik, 2019), but also an increase in the participation of women with children in professional work (Amin et al., 2016), an improvement in the amount and quality of their leisure time (Yerkes et al., 2020), and a strengthening of marital relationships (Garcia et al., 2022).

Positive effects for fathers themselves are evident in the fact that involved fathers become more attentive and responsible, and they show satisfaction with their parenting responsibilities (Petts, Knoester, 2018). Involvement in children's lives significantly increases fathers' competencies (Smith, 2011) and shapes children's positive opinions of fathers (Petts et al., 2020). In addition, fathers' health (Chan et al., 2017) and overall life satisfaction are improved (Kramer et al., 2019).

Global evidence suggests that increasing fathers' participation in child care and development can be achieved by transforming the parental leave system at the state government level. For example, to ensure a more even distribution of child care, housework, and employment between mothers and fathers, a number of countries have introduced special paternity leaves, enshrining not only the right but also the obligation for fathers to use parental leave. Researchers note that the introduction of paternity leave in a number of countries has been very effective. This measure of state family, demographic, gender policies has contributed to a significant increase in the level of fathers'

<sup>2</sup> Fatherhood in Russia Today (2016). Moscow.

involvement in the process of raising children (Saarikallio-Torp, Miettinen, 2021), the growth of gender equality in both professional and domestic spheres of life (Duvander, Andersson, 2006; Tervola et al., 2017). Thus, such a public policy measure as paternity leave has a number of effects, including encouraging fathers to become more involved in child care, development and the overall life of children, reducing gender imbalance in society, increasing the level of women's participation in the formation of the national income of the country.

In Russia, according to existing legislation, parental leave is granted until a child reaches the age of three, but the full benefit (40% of the average salary) is paid only until the age of one and a half. Only one person can use the parental leave, parents cannot take it at the same time, for example. In addition to the mother, the father, grandmother, grandfather, other relative or guardian who takes care of the child can go on parental leave. At the same time, they can take turns using the parental leave, changing an unlimited number of times. In addition, a family member who is on parental leave can work part-time or at home and retain the right to receive benefits. Consequently, in accordance with Russian law the father has the right to use parental leave until the child reaches the age of three, but if the father waives the right to use it, the leave is not shortened, the amount of the allowance paid is not reduced, i.e. the family does not have any consequences of the father not using the leave. It can only be stated that the family has not received those potential positive effects, which, according to numerous studies, arise for the child, father, and mother when the right to parental leave is used by the father of the child.

Despite the special interest in the issue of parental leave abroad, domestic scientific literature pays much less attention to it. In particular, in Russia the issues of fathers' participation in the process of raising a child during parental leave remain understudied. Our study is aimed at filling this gap. Its aim is to study fathers' participation in family responsibilities during parental leave in Russia. The following research questions are addressed in the course of the work.

1. How is the parental workload distributed among family members during parental leave?
2. How satisfied are parents with the current distribution of parental responsibilities?
3. What are the reasons for this distribution?
4. How is the current distribution of parental responsibilities related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents?

### Methodology

The study surveyed mothers and fathers whose families had the right to use parental leave at the time of the survey. The sample size was 1,000 people. 92.3% of the parents who participated in the questionnaire survey were women. The survey was conducted through online panels. The gender and age distribution of the respondents is presented in *Table 1*.

**Table 1. Age and gender distribution of respondents, %**

Respondents's age	Total	Women	Men
18–25	9.6	9.6	9.1
26–35	65.6	67.3	45.4
36–45	24.3	22.1	39.0
46 and older	0.5	0.0	6.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own compilation

A quota sampling type was used. The quotas were set by Russian federal districts in proportion to the population size. Parents from 85 regions of Russia were interviewed (*Tab. 2*).

**Table 2. Distribution of respondents by federal districts of Russia**

Federal District	Population, thousand people	Number of respondents, people
Central	39104.4	269
Northwestern	13901.1	96
South	16434.9	113
North Caucasian	9997.3	69
Volga	28844.3	198
Ural	12295.0	84
Siberian	16889.4	115
Far Eastern	8091.2	56
Total	145557.6	1000

Source: own compilation

The developed system of empirical indicators for the sociological study of family organization of parental leave includes variables related to:

1) the distribution of parental load between family members during maternity leave (respondents were asked to evaluate which family members more often perform certain domestic and parental functions: cooking, accompanying the child to kindergarten, treating the child, playing with the child, etc.);

2) the amount of load related to maternity leave among family members (respondents were asked the following question: "If the entire amount of load related to maternity leave is taken as 100 percent, how is this load approximately distributed among your family members?");

3) satisfaction with the distribution of workload among family members during maternity leave;

4) perceptions of measures that could increase the frequency with which fathers use parental leave.

Data were processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0. Descriptive statistics procedures, frequency analysis, bivariate analysis, and nonparametric statistics were used for analysis. The use of nonparametric methods of analysis (Mann – Whitney U test) was justified by the absence of normal distributions of variable values, as well as a marked difference in the number of male and female respondents in the population of respondents.

### Results and Discussion

The study found that less than half of the parents were satisfied with the current allocation of workload and responsibilities during parental leave (Fig. 1).

To some extent, satisfaction indicators are reflected in the distribution of household responsibilities within the family. The mother of the child bears most of the burden in organizing the household and upbringing of children. On average, estimates of the amount of women's workload are more than 3 times

higher than the amount of time spent by men on similar responsibilities (Fig. 2).

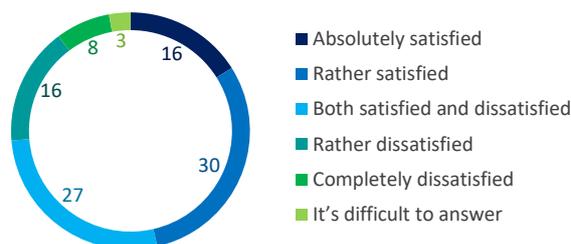


Figure 1. Level of satisfaction with workload sharing during parental leave, %

Source: own compilation based on the survey results.

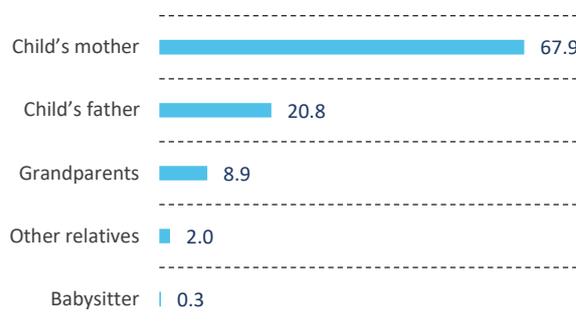


Figure 2. Average distribution of parental and household workload among family members during parental leave, %

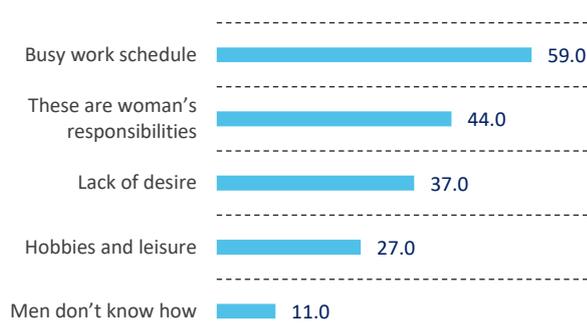
Source: own compilation based on the survey results.

We attempted to assess the degree of influence of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and their families (income level, age and marital status) on the distribution of parental functions within the family during parental leave. A correlation was found between the level of family income and the distribution of parental functions related to children's education and communication with them. The statistical significance of these differences was assessed using the Kruskal – Wallis test (significance level equal to 0.003 and 0.023, respectively). In higher-income families, fathers are more active in educational and communicative parenting. In contrast, in less affluent families, fathers spend less time interacting with their children and are less likely to be involved in their education.

We found no correlation between the age of the spouses and the set of parenting functions they actually perform during maternity

leave. However, we did find a correlation between the amount of paternal workload and the marital status of the respondents. The statistical significance of these differences was assessed using the Mann – Whitney U test (significance level – 0.017). Respondents who are in a registered marriage note more active participation of fathers in their children’s lives.

According to respondents, the main reasons for fathers’ less workload during parental leave are their busy schedule and high workload (59%), their lack of desire to take care of their children during this period (37%), and the high time spent on development, hobbies and recreation (27%). Similar results indicate that fathers are less interested in carrying out various responsibilities during parental leave, devoting considerable time to out-of-home activities, or not at all seeking to share responsibilities equally. This strategy of men’s behavior may be due to stereotypes widespread in Russian society regarding the distribution of family responsibilities, men’s reluctance to perform parental duties, and the existing perception of women that men are not competent to deal with young children. The fact that the first of the listed reasons is the most important is also evidenced by our data – one of the most common so-called reasons for the lower workload of fathers during the period of parental leave is the understanding that “these are all “woman’s responsibilities” (44%; Fig. 3).



**Figure 3. The main reasons for the lesser (compared to mothers) workload of fathers during parental leave, %**

Source: own compilation based on the survey results.

In addition, the results of our study showed that among the parents surveyed, only 2.6%

of families had experience using paternity leave. This result is close to the official data of the Social Insurance Fund of the Russian Federation for 2019: the share of fathers who have taken parental leave for themselves is only 2.02%<sup>3</sup>. In other words, despite the legally established right of fathers to use all or part of their parental leave, the uncommon nature of this practice in Russia is due to the deeply rooted perception of the population (both women and men) that the right to parental leave is essentially the mother’s responsibility.

### Conclusion

The following conclusions can be made on the basis of the study.

The results of the sociological survey demonstrated not only the unequal involvement of fathers and mothers during parental leave, but also a significant superiority of the latter in the performance of parental responsibilities. Rarely any functions are predominantly performed by fathers. The estimate of the total workload carried out by them during the parental leave period is only about 20%.

Thus, the gender imbalance in participation in child care during parental leave is due to the traditional perceptions in the Russian society, according to which the dominant role in child-rearing during this difficult and intensive period of parental work should belong to the mother, and the father’s participation should be insignificant. As a consequence of this the families bear “missed benefits”, i.e. they do not receive those numerous effects which could be received for children, fathers and mothers if fathers are more involved in the processes of children’s life activity.

In our opinion, for fathers’ more active participation and greater involvement in children’s care, institutional mechanisms are needed to ensure their inclusion in the processes of care and education during parental leave. Based on international experience, one of the most effective mechanisms is to introduce the obligation to use some part of parental leave either by the child’s father or by both parents at the same time. We believe that only

<sup>3</sup> One out of every fifty fathers in Russia takes paternity leave. Available at: <https://fss.gov.ru/ru/news/2019/365644.shtml>

such a measure can contribute to the spread of single practices of paternity leave use and the numerous positive effects that are recorded by researchers around the world.

This work expands the available scientific knowledge about gender imbalances in the family sphere. It is especially important that our study focuses on the area of parental leave, thereby forming the prerequisites for the study of this topic in future sociological studies of domestic authors.

The prospect of future work is seen in the analysis of the fathers' involvement in parental

work in different regions of Russia, as well as in the study of the attitude of the Russian parent community to possible forms of transformation of the parental leave system in Russia (introduction of paternity leave practices, increased flexibility elements in the leave structure, increased level of parental benefits). A series of semi-formalized interviews with parents whose families have the right to use parental leave is planned in order to better understand the reasons for the fathers' weak involvement in child care and the prospects for the development of modern paternity practices in Russia.

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