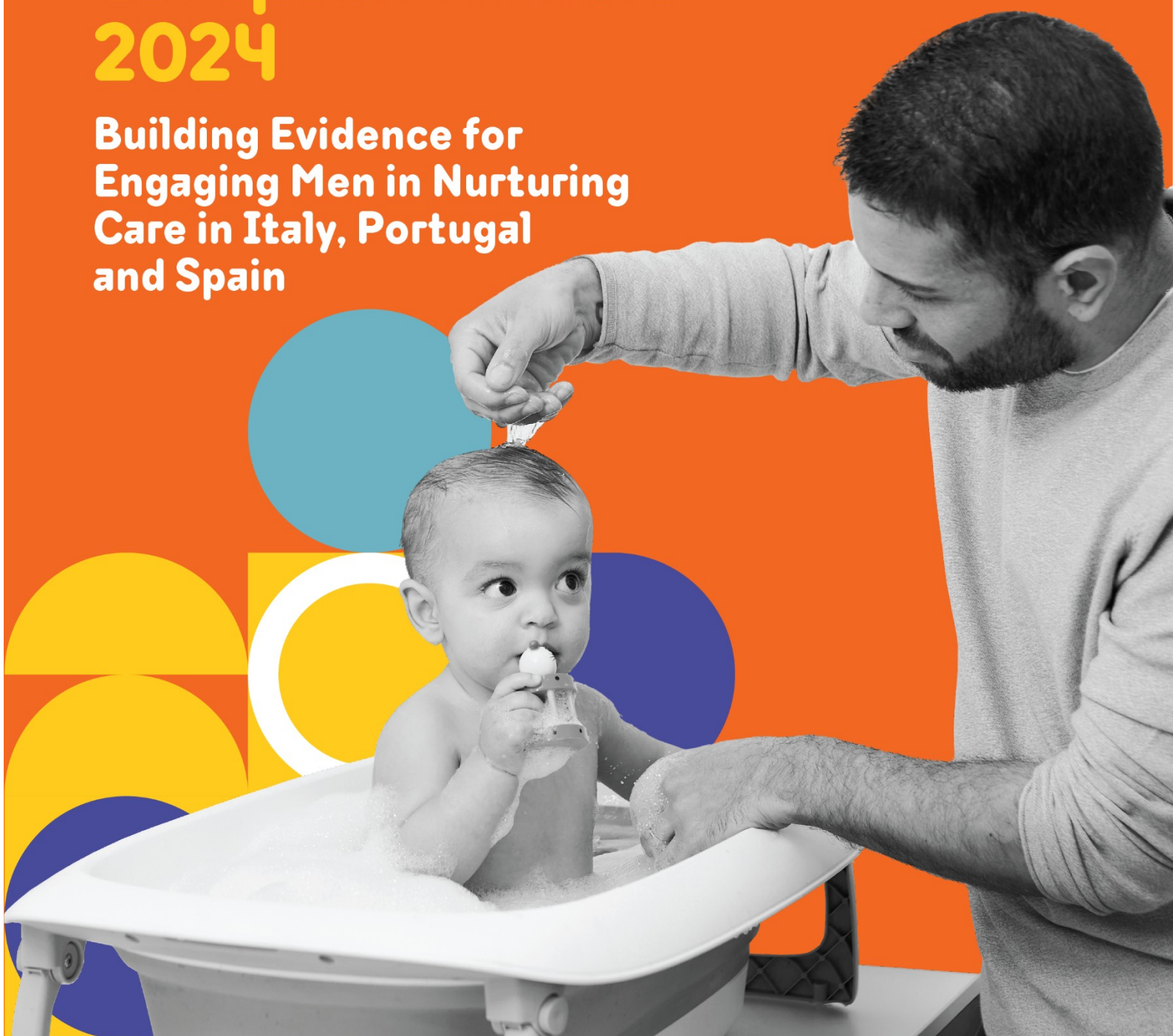


# State of Southern European Fathers 2024

Building Evidence for  
Engaging Men in Nurturing  
Care in Italy, Portugal  
and Spain







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## About Engaging Men in Nurturing Care Initiative (EMiNC)

The Engaging Men in Nurturing Care Initiative (EMiNC) is a 3-year project (February 2023 – February 2026) led by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), aiming to foster shared caregiving in parenting by actively involving men in nurturing care during the early years. The initiative seeks to build compelling evidence at both European and national levels on the significance of positive masculinities, fatherhood, and gender equity in caregiving. By implementing effective programs targeting early childhood professionals, fathers and families, EMiNC aims to transform practices at home and at services to enhance male engagement in caregiving. Additionally, the project focuses on establishing sustainable partnerships at local, national, and EU levels to support policies and programs that encourage men's participation in nurturing care.

The State of Southern European Fathers (SOSEF) survey is a critical component of the EMiNC project, and aims to gather comprehensive data on fathers' attitudes, behaviors, and barriers to engagement in caregiving roles, with a specific focus on Southern European contexts. By highlighting regional trends and challenges, the survey contributes to the EMiNC project's broader mission of fostering gender equity in caregiving practices and informing policy and program development at both national and EU levels.

## Participating EMiNC Partners

### International Step by Step Association (ISSA)

ISSA is a network of 100 early childhood member organizations dedicated to advancing and strengthening a movement for inclusive, high-quality systems, services, and policies that support young children and their families, ensuring every child receives the best possible start in life. Through its involvement in EMiNC, ISSA leverages its extensive experience in system influencing and capacity-building for early childhood professionals to develop strategies that engage men and fathers in caregiving and support gender-equitable parenting practices.

### Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra

The Centre for Social Studies (CES) is a leading interdisciplinary research institution based in Coimbra - Portugal, specializing in social justice, human rights, and gender equality. CES hosts the Observatory Masculinidades.pt, that aggregate scientific knowledge resulting from research on masculinities with particular attention to monitoring concrete and transformative actions in this field.

### Conexus

Conexus is a Spanish organization based in Barcelona specializing in the prevention of gender-based violence and the promotion of healthy relationships. As a key partner in EMiNC, Conexus brings its focus on addressing violence prevention through equitable caregiving, offering innovative tools to engage men in nurturing roles while reducing family stress and conflict.

### CSB onlus - Centro per la Salute delle Bambine e dei Bambini

The Centro per la Salute delle Bambine e dei Bambini (CSB onlus) is an Italian non-profit organization based in Trieste dedicated to promoting early childhood development through research, advocacy, and programs that emphasize the importance of involving fathers in caregiving roles to foster gender equity and enhance child development. CSB onlus collaborates with various stakeholders to support vulnerable families, promoting shared caregiving responsibilities among parents.

## Equipundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice

Equipundo (formerly Promundo) is an international leader in advancing gender equality by engaging men and boys in positive masculinities and caregiving roles. In the context of EMiNC, Equipundo contributes its research and programmatic expertise in promoting fatherhood and dismantling harmful gender norms to foster nurturing care.

## About this Report

The State of Southern European Fathers Survey is a critical component of the Engaging Men in Nurturing Care (EMiNC) initiative – a 3-year multi-country project aimed at fostering gender equity caregiving by actively involving men in nurturing care in early years across Europe. This *State of Southern European Fathers* report is part of the global *State of the World's Fathers* (SOWF) series, coordinated by Equipundo. Building on the evidence and insights from SOWF, this regional report seeks to inform these efforts by gathering comprehensive data on fathers' attitudes, behaviors, and barriers to engagement in caregiving roles, with a specific focus on Southern European context in three countries, namely Italy, Portugal and Spain by highlighting sub-regional trends and challenges. The survey contributes to the EMiNC's broader mission of informing policy and program development at both national and EU levels. The findings of this report contributes to a growing body of research aimed at advancing gender equality and child well-being by promoting men's involvement in unpaid care work across diverse cultural and policy contexts.

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## Executive Summary

**We envision a society in which children grow up seeing men and women receive equal treatment, respect and appreciation as citizens and parents, and where their work is equally valued, distributed, and recognized in informal and formal contexts - including the essential work of nurturing and raising the next generation.**

**Engaged fathers benefits everyone:** it positively impacts children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, fosters gender-equitable attitudes, and contributes to breaking cycles of violence. Women with supportive partners experience greater life satisfaction, reduced parenting stress, and improved postnatal health outcomes. For men, caregiving enhances well-being, promotes healthier behaviors, and fosters stronger family relationships.

**Championing engaged fathers** from the birth of the child, and as they grow into individuals and active members of their families, communities, and society is crucial. Fostering equitable norms from the earliest stages helps shape a future where men and women are equally valued, respected, and appreciated as both citizens and parents, and where caregiving and work are equally distributed and recognized across all aspects of life.

**However, significant barriers hinder fathers' active engagement in caregiving.** Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, workplace stigma, and societal norms continue to frame care work as a woman's responsibility. Many fathers face workplace resistance when requesting parental leave, and policies in some EU countries still prioritize maternal caregiving, limiting men's access to paid leave. Additionally, inadequate early childhood care services and inflexible family policies make it challenging for families to share caregiving duties equitably.

**The consequences** of these enduring barriers to increased father engagement are significant, particularly for women, but they also affect society as a whole. Across the EU, women continue to shoulder most of the unpaid domestic and childcare work (Equimundo, 2023), which limits their labor market participation and contributes to persistent gender pay gaps. Despite European policy efforts such as the EU Work-Life Balance Directive asking for country policy measures, progress in redistributing caregiving duties remains slow, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Cumulative research has shown the benefits of father involvement in nurturing care and shared caregiving for children's development, families themselves and communities.

**Addressing these challenges requires systemic change.** This means policy reforms focused on ensuring equal parental leave, workplace support for involved fatherhood, and awareness-raising initiatives to challenge gendered caregiving norms. This includes sectoral and cross-sectoral training for frontline professionals in health, education, and social services, who can also play a crucial role in encouraging father involvement by fostering inclusive practices and eliminating biases in family support systems.

**This report, developed under the Engaging Men in Nurturing Care Initiative (EMiNC), presents key findings from the State of Southern European Fathers (SOSEF) 2024 survey.** The methodology of the report parallels the Equimundo Report (2023): *State of the World's Fathers 2023: Centering care in a world in crisis*. The data was collected through online surveys in Italy, Portugal and Spain and the survey was answered by 1518 respondents (50% men, 50% women). The survey focused on caregiving behaviors and how it is distributed among men and women, the effect of caregiving

responsibilities on work-life balance and overall wellbeing, the barriers in front of engaging in caregiving and impact of policies and programs on father and men engagement.

Our findings are in line with insights from previous *State of the World's Fathers* reports, emphasizing the need to actively involve men. This includes recognizing the value of both paid and unpaid care work, taking equal responsibility for caregiving at home, and advocating alongside women for equitable care policies in workplaces and public institutions. The key findings and recommendations are summarized below and offer valuable insights that can and should shape the policy reforms needed to usher systemic change that can improve children's lives, and society as a whole.

### Results in a nutshell

- ✓ **The perception gap on 'caregiving'** There is a perception gap in how caregiving responsibilities are viewed. While 74% of fathers believe they share caregiving equally with their partners, only 51% of mothers agree. This suggests that men may perceive their involvement as more equitable than it truly is, which can hinder efforts toward truly balanced caregiving arrangements.
- ✓ **Unpacking different elements of care.** Particularly for children under the age of 5, nearly all mothers (92%) provide daily physical or emotional care, compared to 83% of fathers. The gap is even wider when it comes to household responsibilities like cooking and cleaning—12% more mothers take on these tasks daily compared to fathers. Parental perceptions of who children turn to for care also differ. In all three countries studied, three out of four fathers (74%) believe their youngest child seeks both parents equally for comfort and support. However, only half of mothers (50%) feel the same, suggesting a mismatch in how caregiving involvement is viewed. While many fathers are stepping up—86% report being involved in daily childcare—mothers still carry the heavier load. On average, mothers spend 12 hours a day on caregiving and household work, whereas fathers spend about 9 to 10 hours.
- ✓ **Still, parents agree that father's involvement benefits children and find caregiving fulfilling but exhausting.** There is broad support for more equal caregiving roles, with a strong belief that fathers' active and shared involvement in childcare positively impacts children's development. This view is held by 78% of men and 83% of women, and is especially common in Portugal, where 83% of men and 87% of women agree. Caregiving is generally seen in a positive light by both fathers and mothers, who tend to highlight its rewarding aspects more than its challenges. Half of fathers (50%) and 43% of mothers say caregiving is one of the most enjoyable parts of their lives. Still, the demanding nature of the role is acknowledged — 12% of both fathers and mothers describe caregiving as equally fulfilling and exhausting.
- ✓ **Fathers are willing and increasingly stepping up to their share of caregiving, but there are barriers along the way, especially regarding leave provisions.** Reflecting earlier findings on caregiving roles, parents' reasons for not taking their full parental leave entitlements reveal the **ongoing influence of gender norms and financial pressures**. Among fathers, the most common reason for taking less leave was the belief that they needed to keep working. Over half of fathers (53%) said this influenced their decision, compared to 41% of mothers.

Financial concerns were also a key barrier. Around half of all parents (51%) said that their **parental leave was not fully or adequately paid**, making it difficult to afford taking the full leave-time off. Career-related worries were another factor—38% of fathers and 39% of mothers feared that taking extended leave might **harm their chances for future promotions**.

- ✓ **Leave provisions are not sufficient alone, both parents should be able to balance work and life.** Striking a balance between work and caregiving remains a major challenge for both parents. Over half of fathers (53%) and half of mothers (50%) say **they are unhappy** with how much time they have for both their caregiving and professional duties. Yet, **mothers are more likely to experience stress, exhaustion, and health issues**—largely due to their heavier share of caregiving.

The data reveal clear gender differences **in how caregiving is managed during work hours**. Only 31% of fathers say they often or always juggle caregiving while working, compared to 39% of mothers. This suggests mothers are more frequently pulled in multiple directions, even during their professional time.

**Still, time remains the biggest hurdle.** Among fathers who are dissatisfied with their caregiving involvement, nearly two-thirds (65%) point to time constraints as the main barrier. This sentiment is strongest in Italy (68%) and lowest in Spain (62%).

Meanwhile, **women continue to face greater career sacrifices** due to their caregiving roles. Nearly one-third of women (32%) say parenting has had a negative impact on their career development, compared to 26% of men. Over half of women (52%) have considered reducing their working hours to care for children, compared to just 39% of men.

- ✓ **Current support for parents in child caregiving, and their effectiveness** When asked about specific challenges in accessing care support, parents across Southern Europe overwhelmingly pointed to the **high cost of paid childcare** as their biggest concern. An overwhelming 85% of fathers and 83% of mothers said paid care is too expensive. Concerns about quality also persist. Around two-thirds of parents—67% of fathers and 63% of mothers—expressed dissatisfaction with the standard of paid care available to them while 64% of fathers and 62% of mothers say there are no suitable childcare options in their neighbourhood.

The issue extends beyond access—parents also report that existing childcare options often **don't match their working hours**. Across the region, 70% of fathers and 67% of mothers feel the hours of guaranteed paid care are insufficient. As a result, many working parents find themselves without the support needed to balance job demands with caregiving responsibilities.

Although many employers offer flexible work arrangements, these policies are often underused—especially by men. While 56% of fathers report access to reduced working hours, only 29% actually use them. In contrast, 65% of mothers have access, and 42% make use of these options. The gap is driven by multiple concerns: 33% of men worry about the financial consequences, 27% feel obligated to keep working, and 16% fear job loss. Cultural expectations also play a role, with 7% of fathers avoiding flexible work due to fear of being judged by colleagues.

## Recommendations

Societies where both men's and women's contributions are equally valued and all parents receive equal treatment necessitates a culture of caregiving among men and fathers. This report serves as a call to action for policymakers, employers, and advocates to prioritize fatherhood engagement as a critical component of achieving gender equality in caregiving. While progress has been made, significant barriers remain, particularly in workplace culture, policy implementation, and societal expectations.

**Policy Reforms: Systemic change requires strong policies that equally support caregiving for both parents.**

1. **Expand and equalize paid parental leave for fathers.** Policies should mandate fully paid, non-transferable leave for fathers, ensuring shared caregiving responsibility.

2. **Ensure financial security during leave.** Governments should provide wage-replacement schemes to make extended leave affordable, especially for low-income families where fathers are less likely to take parental leave due to financial barriers.
3. **Invest in affordable, high-quality childcare and eldercare.** Expanding subsidized care services (daycare, after-school programs, elder support) can ease caregiving burdens, particularly for mothers, and promote fathers' involvement in diverse caregiving roles.
4. **Enforce the EU Work-Life Balance Directive.** Countries should align policies with EU standards to guarantee fathers access to parental leave, flexible work, and protection from workplace discrimination.
5. **Track and evaluate gender disparities in policy implementation.** Annual reports should track leave uptake, caregiving hours, and workplace policies to ensure accountability in achieving gender-equitable caregiving.

**Workplace Transformation: Allowing fathers to engage in care without career penalties or stigma is crucial for shifting workplace culture.**

1. **Expand flexible work policies.** Employers should provide remote work, reduced hours, and flexible schedules, especially for fathers of young children, to normalize caregiving in the workplace.
2. **Address workplace stigma around caregiving.** Run employer campaigns to challenge caregiving as a "women's role" and support fathers taking leave or flexibility.
3. **Ensure job protection for caregiving leave.** Strengthen anti-discrimination laws to protect fathers from penalties for taking parental leave or using flexible work options.
4. **Incentivize businesses to support caregiving.** Provide tax incentives or subsidies for companies that adopt family-friendly policies, including extended paternity leave, subsidized childcare, or on-site daycare.
5. **Encourage father-friendly workplaces.** Recognize businesses that champion caregiving-friendly policies through certifications or awards, similar to gender-equality rankings.

**Cultural Change: Social and cultural norms around caregiving must evolve to fully integrate men as equal caregivers.**

1. **Launch public campaigns celebrating father involvement.** Media campaigns should highlight real-life fathers, challenge traditional masculinity, and promote caregiving as a strength that benefits families.
2. **Normalize fatherhood education.** Expand father-focused programs like prenatal classes, bonding initiatives, and peer mentoring to normalize male caregiving.
3. **Elevate male caregiving role models.** Highlight caregiving fathers in leadership, politics, and media, recognizing those who take parental leave or advocate for policies.
4. **Raise awareness of fathers' legal entitlements.** Launch public campaigns to inform fathers of their caregiving rights and encourage equal parental leave uptake.
5. **Integrate caregiving into school curriculums.** Teach children about shared caregiving early to break gendered expectations.
6. **Challenge stereotypes through storytelling.** Support media that portrays fathers as nurturing caregivers, moving away from outdated stereotypes.

7. **Train professionals to engage fathers.** Equip early childhood staff to challenge gender norms and create welcoming, father-inclusive environments that support shared caregiving from the start.

**Community engagement: Building local networks can drive a shift toward more equitable caregiving.**

1. **Create fatherhood networks and peer groups** through community initiatives, online platforms, and in-person meetups to share experiences, challenges, and caregiving strategies.
2. **Develop care cooperatives.** Encourage shared caregiving models where parents, especially fathers, collaborate on childcare and eldercare to ease individual family burdens.
3. **Strengthen partnerships with civil society.** Partner with NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups to push for policy change, raise awareness, and expand grassroots caregiving support.
4. **Create men's engagement hubs in public spaces. Use public spaces** like libraries and schools to host father-child activities, workshops, and parenting classes.
5. **Encourage intergenerational caregiving initiatives.** Connect fathers with older caregivers to bridge generational gaps and challenge traditional caregiving norms.

# INTRODUCTION



# Introduction

**Evidence consistently shows that fathers' involvement in nurturing care is not only essential as a matter of equity, but also as a pathway to broader societal benefits.** Men's involvement in care improves children's developmental outcomes, enhances mothers' employment opportunities, and contributes to men's own well-being. A strong body of evidence indicates that increased father involvement is linked to positive outcomes in children's physical and mental health, socioemotional and cognitive development, academic achievement, and behavior; with early benefits compounding into adulthood (Baker, 2017; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Cabrera et al., 2000; Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013; Levtov et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2024). Furthermore, when fathers share caregiving responsibilities equitably, they not only support their children but also improve their partners' well-being, reducing parenting stress and fostering healthier family dynamics (Swan & Doyle, 2019). Notably, men also benefit greatly from active fatherhood – fathers who engage in caregiving report lower levels of stress and depression, as well as increased life satisfaction, emotional resilience, and a deeper sense of purpose and identity (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Palkovitz, 2002; Lamb, 2010). Research also highlights physical health benefits, as involved fathers are more likely to adopt healthier lifestyles, including better nutrition and increased physical activity, which contribute to overall well-being (Kotelchuck, 2022). These and countless other research findings underscore the importance of encouraging fathers to engage more actively in caregiving to advance gender equality and foster healthier family dynamics.

The State of Southern European Fathers report emerges at a critical juncture in the discourse on caregiving, gender equality, early childhood development and family well-being. Across Southern Europe, societal norms are shifting, driven by evolving expectations around fatherhood and the growing recognition of men as equal partners in caregiving. Yet, cultural, structural, and

economic barriers persist, often limiting men's participation in caregiving and perpetuating inequities in families and workplaces. This report builds on the global momentum created by the "State of the World's Fathers 2023," offering a regional lens to examine the unique challenges and opportunities faced by fathers and parents in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. With an emphasis on care in the early years of a child's life, the report addresses the interplay between caregiving practices, policies, and societal attitudes in Southern Europe's diverse cultural contexts.

The findings from this report are particularly timely as Southern European nations respond to EU directives, such as the Work-Life Balance Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158), which aims to promote shared caregiving responsibilities (European Union, 2019). Country specific regulations, such as recent reforms in Spain's parental leave policies, also provide an opportunity to assess how such changes influence fathers' caregiving roles. As Southern Europe grapples with persistent gender gaps in labor force participation and caregiving, this report serves as a call to action for policymakers, employers, and families.

This report is a core output of the Engaging Men in Nurturing Care (EMiNC) initiative to contribute to building a compelling evidence-based narrative at the European and country levels about the importance of positive masculinities, fatherhood, and gender equity in caregiving to create more supportive environments for families. This report seeks to answer fundamental questions about caregiving in Southern Europe:

- Who provides care, and how is care distributed between fathers and mothers?
- What barriers prevent fathers from engaging more fully in caregiving?
- How do caregiving responsibilities impact work-life balance, mental health, and family relationships?

- What policies and programs support or hinder fathers' caregiving?

The report explores variations across Italy, Portugal, and Spain, offering both regional and cross-country insights

into caregiving practices, attitudes, and policies to provide a roadmap for action on care work in Southern Europe.

# METHODS





## Methods

**Sampling.** The State of Southern European Fathers survey used non-probabilistic purposive sampling, strategically focusing on parents to gain in-depth insights into caregiving dynamics among those directly responsible for care. By deliberately concentrating on this group, the study aimed to capture key trends and challenges in caregiving across Southern Europe, ensuring findings are highly relevant to those most affected by care-related policies and social structures. An existing online panel was engaged by data firm Rep Data. To ensure diverse perspectives, sampling quotas established a balanced gender distribution, with 50% men and 50% women, inclusive of those identifying otherwise. Geographic representation was also a priority, with respondents recruited proportionately to the population of all regions of Italy, Portugal, and Spain. All respondents provided informed consent and were incentivized for their participation.

**Instruments.** The survey instrument was co-developed by Equipundo in close collaboration with EMiNC partner institutions, ensuring a comprehensive yet tailored tool. To provide consistency and comparability across contexts, the tool incorporated a core set of standardized questions covering topics such as care involvement, attitudes around care, barriers to engagement in care work, and facilitators to caregiving (including support services and policies).

**Data collection.** The survey was administered online from September 14 to October 7, 2024, by data firm Rep Data, ensuring efficient and wide-reaching participation and following sampling and international ethics guidelines. Equipundo maintained close oversight

throughout the process, evaluating data quality and research integrity at various points of the data collection and analysis stages.

**Analysis.** The analysis was designed to generate actionable insights into caregiving patterns, barriers, facilitators, and attitudes, as well as their impact on work-life balance and well-being. A combination of descriptive statistics and statistical modeling techniques—including bivariate and multivariate regression analyses—was employed to uncover key relationships such as parental leave uptake, caregiving attitudes, and work-life balance outcomes. Only statistically significant results ( $p < 0.05$ ) are reported, ensuring robust and reliable findings. At its core, the study prioritized cross-country comparisons, providing in-depth insights into caregiving in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Additionally, gender-based analyses were a central focus, offering a detailed understanding of caregiving dynamics among men and women.

**Sample characteristics.** Overall, the sample is well balanced to present a faithful picture of caregiving in Southern Europe. The survey sample consisted of 1,518 parents residing in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, with an equal gender distribution (50% men, 50% women). Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 74 years old, with a mean age of 42.7 years and a median age of 43 years, with most respondents in their 30s and 40s. Most participants were married or cohabiting, and a significant proportion (44%) had children under five, reflecting the ever-delayed transition to parenthood in Europe, with an average age of first childbirth set at 32 for men and 29 for women in our sample. See Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

|  | Total         |               | Italy          |                | Portugal      |               | Spain          |               |
|--|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
|  | Men           | Women         | Men            | Women          | Men           | Women         | Men            | Women         |
| Survey respondents - % (n)                     | 50<br>(760)   | 50<br>(758)   | 47.1<br>(240)  | 52.9<br>(269)  | 44.8<br>(226) | 55.1<br>(278) | 58.1<br>(294)  | 41.7<br>(211) |
| Age - Mean (SD)                                | 43.6<br>(9.9) | 41.8<br>(9.7) | 45.8<br>(10.1) | 43.8<br>(10.7) | 42.0<br>(9.4) | 40.5<br>(8.9) | 43.0<br>(9.8)  | 40.8<br>(8.8) |
| Has children under 5 - % (n)                   | 45.4<br>(345) | 43.1<br>(327) | 36.2<br>(87)   | 39.0<br>(105)  | 46.5<br>(105) | 43.2<br>(120) | 52.0<br>(153)  | 48.3<br>(102) |
| Has Disabilities - % (n)                       | 11.2<br>(85)  | 11.5<br>(87)  | 10.8<br>(26)   | 10.8<br>(29)   | 16.4<br>(37)  | 12.2<br>(34)  | 7.5<br>(22)    | 11.4<br>(24)  |
| Economic Hardship - % (n)                      | 23.4<br>(176) | 23.7<br>(176) | 30.3<br>(72)   | 26.7<br>(71)   | 18.8<br>(42)  | 22.6<br>(61)  | 21.3<br>(62)   | 21.3<br>(44)  |
| <b>Education - % (n)</b>                       |               |               |                |                |               |               |                |               |
| Up to Secondary                                | 32.0<br>(243) | 31.5<br>(239) | 46.6<br>(112)  | 51.7<br>(139)  | 38.5<br>(87)  | 32.4<br>(90)  | 15.0<br>(44)   | 10.0<br>(21)  |
| Vocational training                            | 15.8<br>(120) | 15.6<br>(118) | 3.8<br>(9)     | 4.1<br>(11)    | 19.5<br>(44)  | 17.6<br>(49)  | 22.8<br>(67)   | 27.5<br>(58)  |
| Bachelors / 3-yr degree                        | 36.5<br>(277) | 36.5<br>(277) | 35.4<br>(85)   | 36.8<br>(99)   | 31.4<br>(71)  | 30.9<br>(86)  | 41.1<br>(121)  | 43.6<br>(92)  |
| Masters or higher                              | 15.0<br>(114) | 14.8<br>(112) | 14.2<br>(34)   | 10.4<br>(28)   | 10.2<br>(23)  | 16.9<br>(47)  | 19.4<br>(57)   | 17.54<br>(37) |
| <b>Relationship Status - % (n)</b>             |               |               |                |                |               |               |                |               |
| Single   | 7.1 (54)      | 10.6<br>(80)  | 3.3<br>(8)     | 5.6<br>(15)    | 10.6<br>(24)  | 14.8<br>(41)  | 7.5<br>(22)    | 11.4<br>(24)  |
| In a relationship, not living together         | 2.8 (21)      | 4.0<br>(30)   | 3.8<br>(9)     | 4.8<br>(13)    | 3.5 (8)       | 4.3<br>(12)   | 1.4<br>(4)     | 2.4<br>(5)    |
| Not married, living with partner               | 15.5<br>(118) | 19.5<br>(148) | 15.8<br>(38)   | 16.0<br>(43)   | 20.8<br>(47)  | 24.5<br>(68)  | 11.2<br>(33)   | 17.5<br>(37)  |
| Married  | 67.6<br>(514) | 56.7<br>(430) | 71.7<br>(172)  | 65.1<br>(175)  | 57.1<br>(129) | 46.8<br>(130) | 72.5<br>(213)  | 59.2<br>(125) |
| Divorced, separated, widowed & other           | 6.8 (52)      | 8.8<br>(67)   | 5.0 (12)       | 8.2<br>(22)    | 8.0<br>(18)   | 9.4<br>(26)   | 7.5<br>(22)    | 9.0<br>(19)   |
| Sexual orientation (% heterosexual)            | 93.5<br>(712) | 89.5<br>(678) | 95.8<br>(230)  | 93.3<br>(251)  | 93.4<br>(211) | 86.3<br>(240) | 92.18<br>(271) | 88.6<br>(187) |
| <b>Employment %</b>                            |               |               |                |                |               |               |                |               |
| Full- & part- time employee                    | 83.1          | 67.0          | 80.2           | 50.2           | 83.6          | 69.1          | 84.7           | 73.0          |
| Freelancer or independent contractor           | 9.1           | 9.5           | 12.1           | 8.2            | 9.3           | 13.7          | 6.5            | 5.7           |
| Not employed, looking                          | 2.5           | 7.0           | 1.3            | 5.6            | 3.1           | 7.2           | 3.1            | 8.5           |
| Not employed, not looking                      | 1.1           | 1.5           | 0.4            | 1.9            | 0.9           | 1.8           | 1.7            | 0.5           |
| Studying full time                             | 0.0           | 0.5           | 0.0            | 0.4            | 0.0           | 0.4           | 0.0            | 1.0           |
| Stay-at-home full time for house and care work | 1.1           | 10.4          | 0.8            | 18.6           | 0.0           | 4.7           | 2.0            | 7.6           |
| Retired or pensioned                           | 2.4           | 1.7           | 3.8            | 2.2            | 1.8           | 0.7           | 1.7            | 2.4           |

As expected with online panel sampling, respondents had higher employment rates, lower economic hardship and higher education levels than the general population of the countries represented. This reflects a common self-selection bias in online surveys, where more educated and economically stable individuals are more

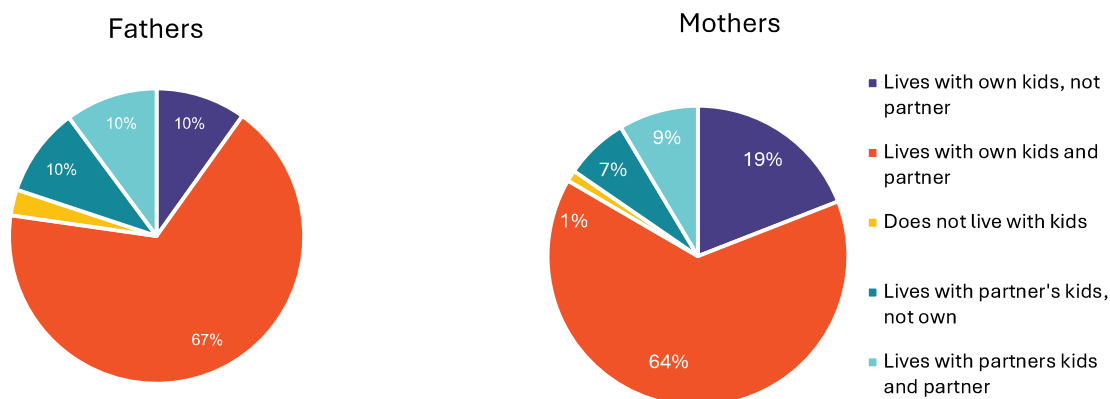
likely to participate (Bethlehem, 2010). Consequently, it is important to point out that results from this survey may underestimate existing gender gaps, as they often over-represent individuals with more progressive attitudes toward gender roles (Dohmen et al., 2011).

Although education levels varied, the majority had at least a secondary education degree (69%), while over 50% had a bachelor’s degree or higher qualifications. Employment levels were high but distinct for men and women, with over 83% of men engaged in full- or part-time work, compared to 67% of women ( $p < 0.001$ ). Women in our sample were 10 times more likely than men to be full-time stay-at-home caregivers (10% vs. 1%), with this disparity reaching almost 20 times in Italy (19% vs. 1%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, about 24% of respondents experienced some degree of economic hardship (i.e. never/rarely/sometimes able to afford basic or important

goods and services – vs. always/often), 12% identified as migrants, and 11% identified as having a disability themselves.

Regarding caregiving responsibilities, 98% of respondents still reside with children (either of own or their partner’s), presumably carrying some degree of responsibility over their care. A vast majority of respondents reside as a family unit, with their partner and children, although one fifth of women (19%) said to be single parenting in their households – double the rate of their male counterparts (10%). See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Percent of men and women in different forms of cohabitation or residential status.



Additionally, 29% of respondents said they were providing elder care, while 26% cared for individuals with disabilities on a regular basis. Combined, the amount of care responsibility represented by the resulted in a

heavily burdened or "sandwiched" cohort—over one in four participants managed both elder or disability care alongside childcare. See Table 2.

**Table 2.** Percent of Southern European fathers and mothers reporting additional caregiving responsibilities for relatives.

|  | Total         |               | Italy        |               | Portugal     |              | Spain        |              |
|--|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|  | Men           | Women         | Men          | Women         | Men          | Women        | Men          | Women        |
| <b>Caregiving Responsibilities</b>   |               |               |              |               |              |              |              |              |
| Elder Care - % (n)   | 28.0<br>(213) | 30.7<br>(233) | 32.5<br>(78) | 37.9<br>(102) | 23.9<br>(54) | 21.2<br>(59) | 27.6<br>(81) | 34.1<br>(72) |
| Care for People with Disabilities - % (n)  | 23.8<br>(181) | 27.6<br>(209) | 24.2<br>(58) | 30.1<br>(81)  | 19.5<br>(44) | 22.3<br>(62) | 26.9<br>(79) | 31.3<br>(66) |
| "Sandwiched generation": parents caring for elders/pwd <i>and</i> cohabiting with kids % (n) | 26.7<br>(199) | 30.0<br>(225) | 31.1<br>(73) | 37.5<br>(100) | 22.5<br>(50) | 20.7<br>(55) | 26.3<br>(76) | 33.5<br>(70) |

# RESULTS





## Results

This section presents key findings from the State of Southern European Fathers survey, examining caregiving patterns and their broader implications. It is structured around four main questions: (1) *Who provides care?* Exploring the actual and perceived distribution of caregiving responsibilities; (2) *What barriers exist?* Identifying structural, workplace, and cultural factors that shape fathers' involvement in caregiving; (3) *What is the impact of caregiving involvement?* Analyzing the connections between caregiving, work-life balance, and wellbeing; and (4) *What support structures exist?* Assessing the role of policies, workplace flexibility, and early childhood services in enabling fathers' participation.

### 1. Who cares – and how do they care?

To understand who does the care work, we asked respondents how many hours per day they spent on different caregiving tasks in the past week. Tasks included providing childcare, performing housework, caring for one's own and other people's emotional and physical needs, engaging with their communities, or caring for their environment. Additionally, the survey explored

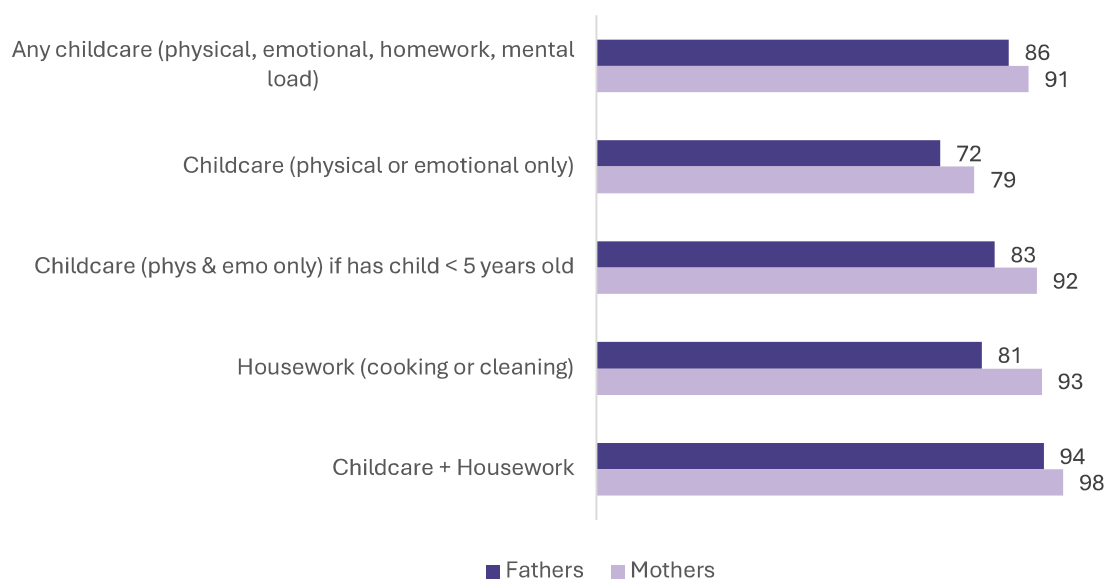
perceptions of caregiving distribution within households, as well as satisfaction with how care responsibilities are shared.

#### Childcare and housework

**The survey reveals that men are stepping up to the care tasks, at times nearly matching women's contributions. However, important and significant gaps remain.**

When we look at care provision as a dichotomy between doing *any* amount daily care and not engaging in care *at all*, we see that –across all countries– over 91% of mothers and around 86% of fathers (a small but statistically significant difference,  $p = 0.010$ ) are involved in some form of routine childcare; whether emotional or physical care, homework support or mental load-related tasks. The difference is wider among parents of children aged 5 and under, where 92% of mothers vs. 83% of fathers provide daily physical or emotional care ( $p < 0.001$ ). The gap is widest for household care (cooking and cleaning), with a 12-percentage point difference between fathers and mothers ( $p < 0.001$ ). See Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Percent of mothers and fathers in full sample (Italy, Portugal and Spain) that perform any amount of routine domestic and/or childcare. All gender differences are significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).



### Caregiving Still Falls More on Mothers

Among parents of children under 5, mothers (92%) are more likely than fathers (83%) to provide daily physical or emotional care. While 74% of fathers believe caregiving duties are shared equally, only 51% of mothers feel the same—many say they shoulder most of the care responsibilities. This suggests that men may perceive their involvement as more equitable than it truly is, which can hinder efforts toward truly balanced caregiving arrangements.

As for high-intensity caregiving (4+ hours per day) —a threshold characterized by the increased likelihood of health repercussions on caregivers<sup>1</sup>—, women tend to out-care men across the board. This is true for engagement in intense forms of children’s emotional care (1.7 times more women than men; 11.2% vs. 6.6%,  $p = 0.001$ ), children’s physical care (1.6 times more women than men; 13.9% vs. 8.8,  $p = 0.005$ ), and —with particular vehemence— with housework tasks, where 2.1 times more women than men engage in high-intensity form of cleaning of the house (15% vs. 7%;  $p < 0.001$ ). In Italy, this difference is most pronounced, with 2.7 times more women than men surpassing the 4hrs per day mark for cleaning the house (20% vs. 7%;  $p < 0.001$ );

and 2.6 times more women doing the intensive care for children’s emotional needs (14% vs. 5%;  $p = 0.004$ ).

**If we look at the total number of hours reportedly spent on childcare and housework (an imperfect measure that**

<sup>1</sup> In caregiving research, providing care for 80 hours or more per month—which averages to approximately 4 hours per day—is often used to define high-intensity caregiving. This threshold is commonly employed to assess the effects of intensive caregiving on individuals’ work-life balance and overall well-being, as studies

have shown that caregivers at this level of commitment are more likely to experience significant impacts on their mental health, including increased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Carretero et al., 2022).

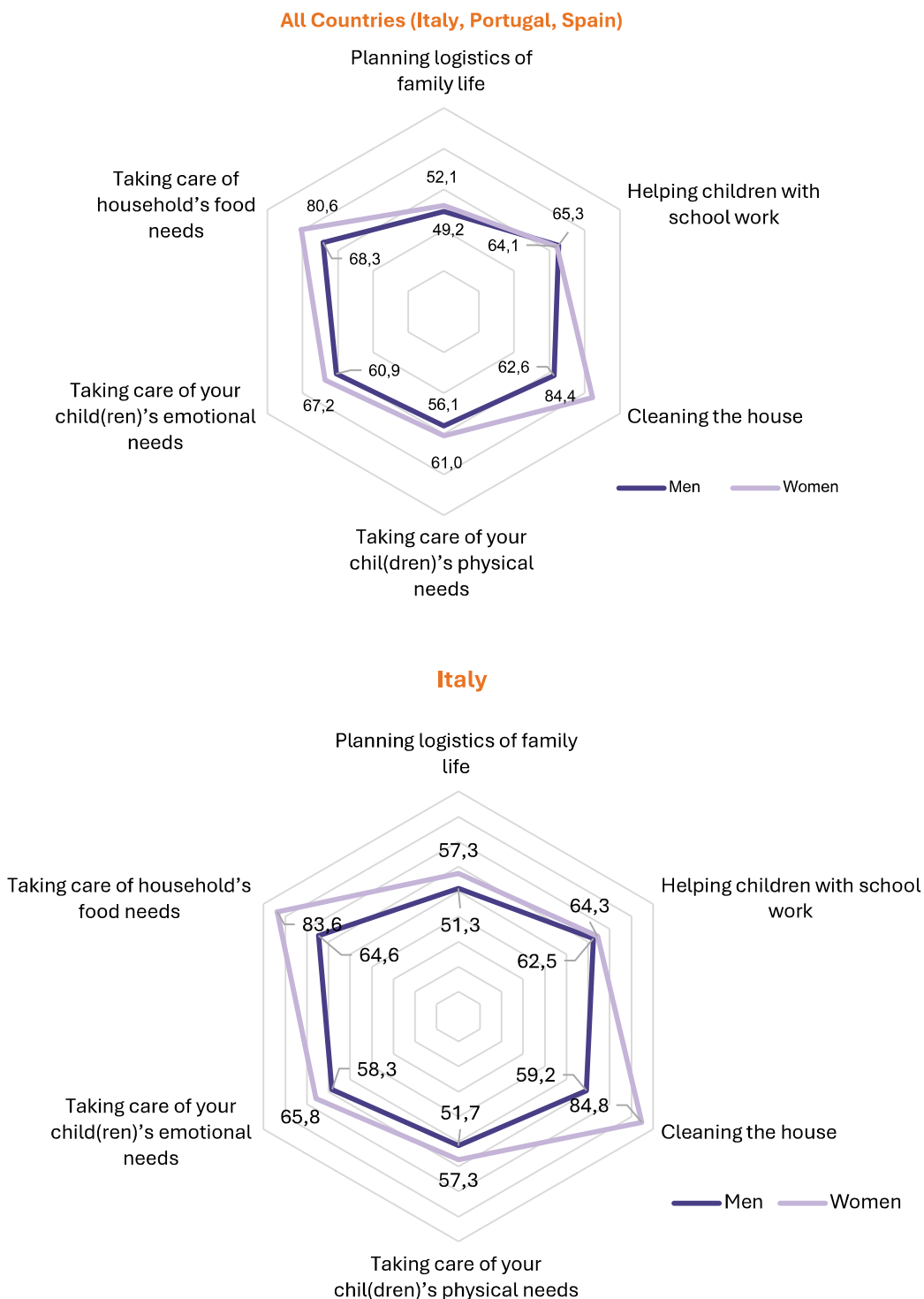
can obscure engagement in multitasking and related adverse effects on health and wellbeing), women do significantly more. Spanish fathers report an average total of 10.1 hours spent on caregiving plus housework tasks per day, slightly more than their Italian (9.5 hours) and Portuguese (9.1 hours) counterparts. In contrast, mothers performed an average of around 12 hours of caregiving and housework daily – a significant difference in all three countries ( $t = 2.11-3.9$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Zooming in on specific tasks, fathers in Italy, Portugal, and Spain report increasingly stepping up to some caregiving roles in similar numbers to women, especially around children’s tangible needs.** For instance, while still apparent, differences in the proportion of fathers’ and mothers’ engagement in *physical care of children* (e.g., changing diapers, bathing, feeding, dropping or picking up child from school, taking care of them when they are sick, etc.), *helping children with schoolwork or extracurriculars* and *planning of family logistics* (e.g., setting up doctor appointments for family members, planning for vacations, making parent-teacher appointments, etc.) are not statistically significant.

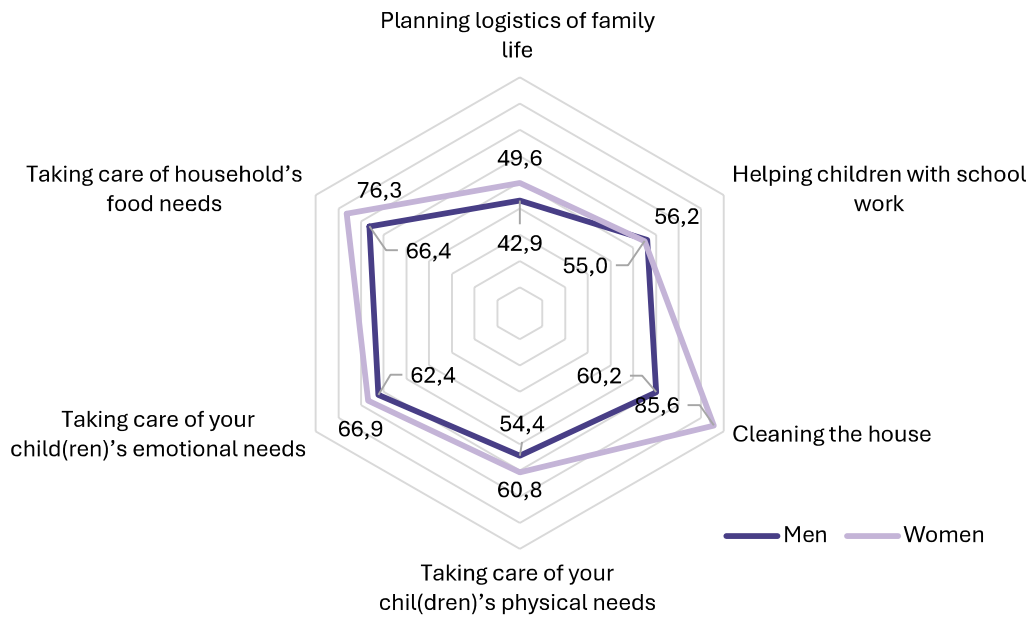
**That said, women are still bearing the brunt of house chores and emotional labor across the board. Notable and large differences did emerge in emotional caregiving of children and housework – domains more**

**perniciously attributed to women’s gender roles.** For instance, women are more likely than men to report routinely engaging in any amount of *emotional caregiving of children*, such as talking to them through their struggles or helping them feel better (67% vs. 61%;  $p = 0.011$ ). At the country level, gender differences did not reach statistical significance. When it comes to housework involvement, the gap is much clearer. As for housework, women are 1.3 times more likely than men to participate in any amount of *cleaning the house* (e.g., doing dishes after a meal, cleaning the floors, washing the clothes, cleaning the bathroom, cleaning the yard/garden; 84% vs. 63%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and 1.2 times more likely to provide for the *household’s food needs* (e.g., making list of food/groceries needed to buy from the market for the house, preparing food; 81% vs. 68%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Regression analysis shows that men spend approximately 0.42 fewer hours per day (about 25 minutes) on household care work compared to women, holding other factors such as country, region, age and education constant. Of all countries surveyed, Italy exhibits the greatest housework involvement gaps, with over 85% of women (vs. 59% of men) regularly cleaning the house, and double the proportion of Italian women engaging in an intensive amount of this activity (over 4 hours/day) than their male counterparts (15% vs. 7%;  $p < 0.001$ ). See Figure 3.

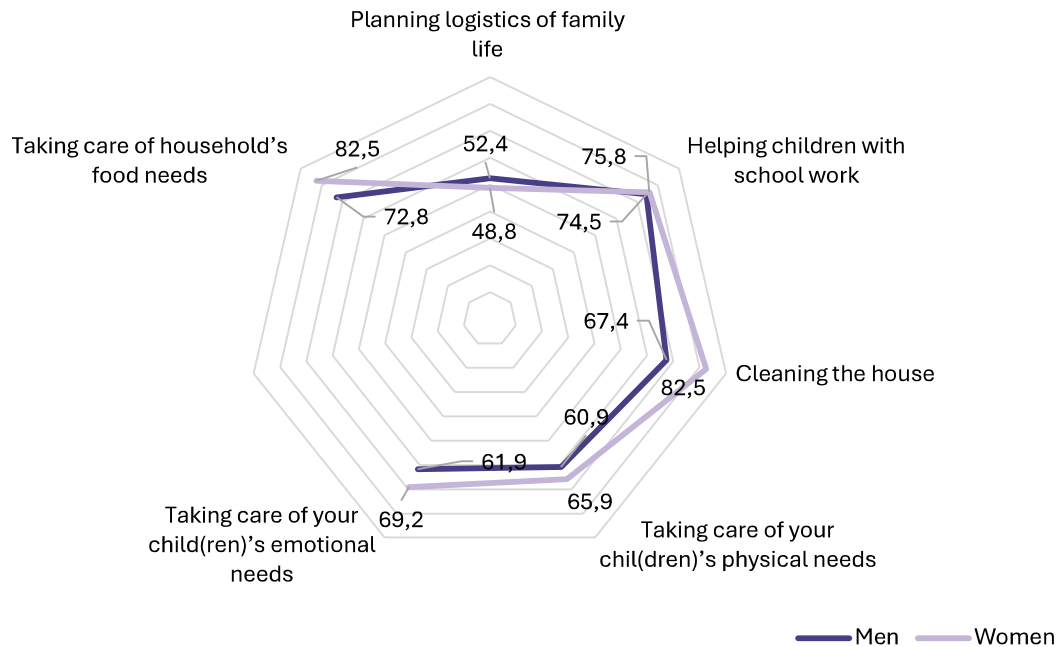
Figure 3. Percent of men and women in all three countries total, and in each of the surveyed countries separately, that performs any amount (<1h/day) of six types of domestic and childcare.



### Portugal



### Spain



**This disparity in care work is closely tied to labor force inequalities.** Over a third of women (38% vs. 26% of men;  $p < 0.001$ ) report doing more care work at home because their partner has a higher-paying job. Women are also 10

times more likely than men to be full-time stay-at-home caregivers (10% vs. 1%;  $p < 0.001$ ), a gap that reaches nearly 20 times in Italy (19% vs. 1%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Even among the self-employed, only 44% of women

(compared to 70% of men;  $p < 0.001$ ) say this was their preferred choice, while 35% of women (vs. 16% of men;  $p < 0.001$ ) cite caregiving flexibility as the primary reason for self-employment. These findings highlight persistent gender norms that limit women’s economic participation and reinforce their disproportionate share of unpaid care

### Self-Care and Care for Partners

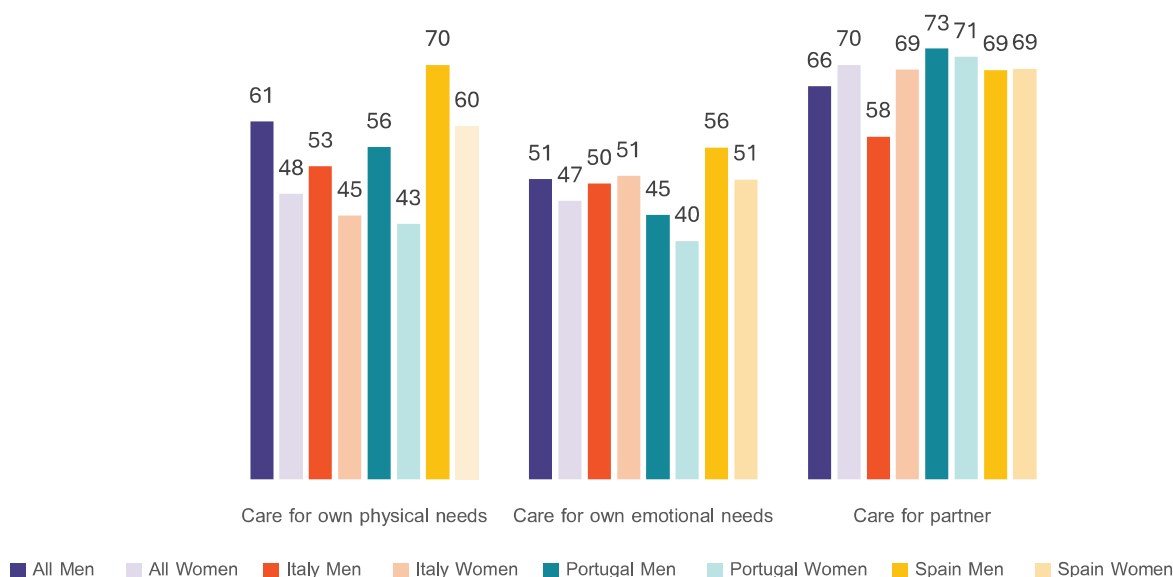
**Self-care is essential for parents, not only for their own well-being but also for the healthy development of their children.** Research shows that neglecting self-care increases the risk of parental burnout, stress-related illnesses, and mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. Furthermore, it can impact children directly through emotional distancing and parental ineffectiveness, and can even exacerbate patterns of child abuse and neglect (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). Regular self-care—whether through rest, physical activity, social connection, or personal interests—enhances resilience, patience, and emotional availability, all of which contribute to more positive and nurturing family dynamics.

work. Addressing these imbalances requires structural shifts—including greater workplace flexibility, parental leave policies, and investments in care infrastructure—to enable a more equitable division of care responsibilities (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023).

**Mothers are less likely to take time to care for their physical self than fathers, with less than half of women reporting any amount of daily care for their bodies.**

Across the three countries, 60.5% of Southern European fathers –vs. 48.3% of mothers—said that they take any time to exercise, eat healthy food or otherwise care for their physical health ( $p < 0.001$ ). Data from Portugal and Spain drove this difference, with 56.2% of Portuguese dads vs. 43.2% of moms ( $p = 0.004$ ) and 70.1% of Spanish dads vs. 59.7% moms ( $p = 0.016$ ) spending any amount of time on physical self-care. As for emotional care of oneself, the survey revealed no gender differences between men and women, but no more than 50% of either dedicate any time in a day to this purpose. See Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Percent of men and women who engage in any amount of daily self-care or care for their partners in the past week.



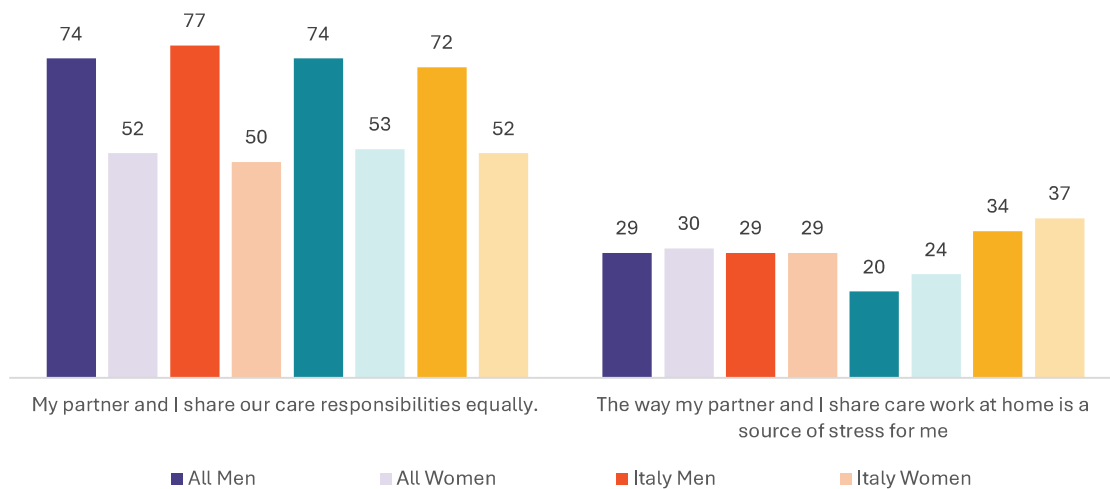
For those who reported being partnered at the time of the survey, over two thirds of men and women say to engage in some amount of care for partners daily – including washing their clothes, preparing their food, taking care of their health, asking about their emotional problems. Differences between men’s and women’s reports were only apparent in Italy, where 69% of women vs. 58% of men ( $p = 0.013$ ) said they are engaging in this form of care daily in the past week.

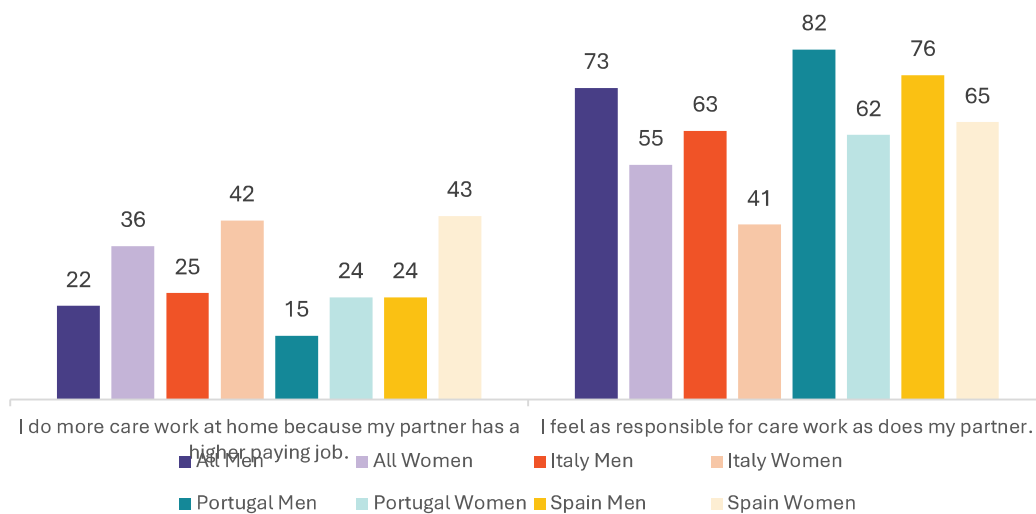
**they are equally involved, mothers' responses suggest a lived reality where caregiving responsibilities remain disproportionately on their shoulders.** When asked directly whether they are “satisfied with how their partner and them divide their care responsibilities”, 59% of women vs. 75% of men agree or strongly agree ( $p < 0.001$ ). In line with this, fathers report the highest levels of perceived caregiving equality, with 74% stating that they “share care responsibilities equally” with their partners, while only 52% of women agree, attributing to themselves a larger share of the care work instead. In Italy, this gap is particularly accentuated, followed by Portugal, and then Spain. See Figure 5.

### Perceptions of (and Satisfaction with) Care Distribution

**Interestingly, care realities and care perceptions seem to be in conflict. While fathers may genuinely believe**

**Figure 5.** Percent of men and women who agree or strongly agree with statements on care work distribution overall (in all three countries) and in each country.

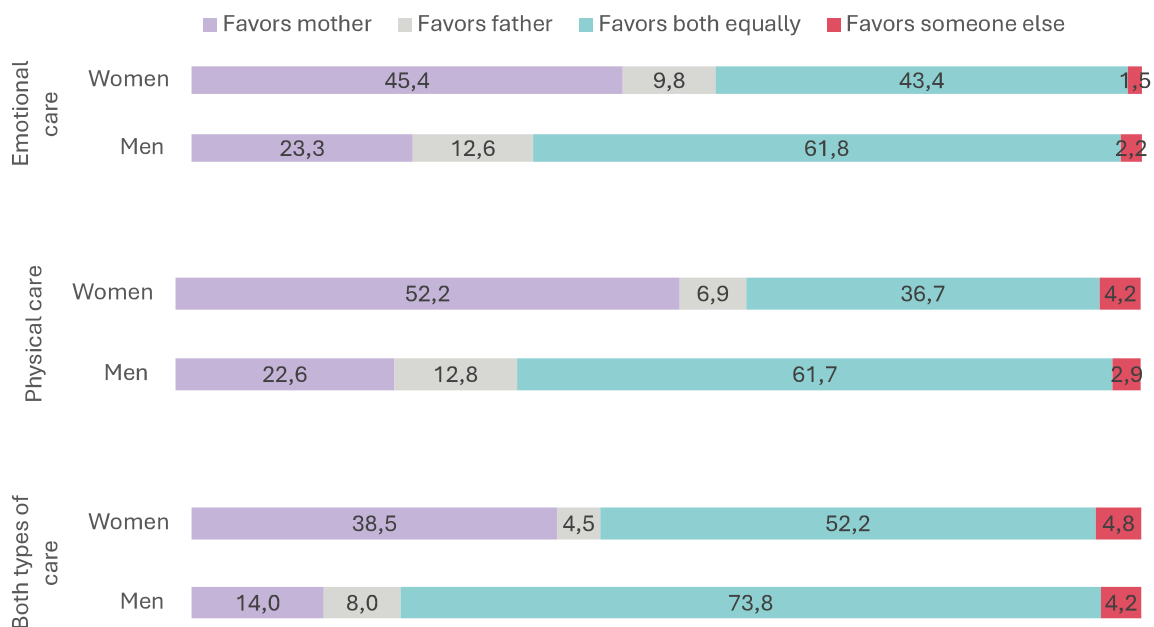




**A similar pattern emerges when looking at perceptions of children's caregiver preferences.** Across all three countries, 3 out of 4 fathers believe their youngest child seeks both parents equally for emotional or physical care, yet only half of mothers agree (74% vs. 50% p<0.001). In fact, 45% of mothers report being the preferred provider of emotional support, and 52% say

they are the main caregiver for physical care, compared to just 13% of fathers who say the same about themselves (p<0.001). This perception gap is most pronounced in Portugal, where the difference in fathers' and mothers' reports of primacy reaches 30 percentage points, and reports of equal preference differs by nearly 20 percentage points. See Figure 6.

**Figure 6.** Percent of Southern European fathers and mothers who report on child preference of caregiver for emotional and physical care.



**When asked about satisfaction with the amount of time people are able to devote to care —such as taking care of your partner, house, children or elderly parents—, we see the struggle both among men and women.** Across all countries, more than half of men (56%) and nearly 60% of women express some level of dissatisfaction (ranging from “more or less satisfied” to “not at all satisfied”) with the amount of care they can afford time to give ( $p = \text{not sig}$ ). Parents in Portugal report the highest levels of dissatisfaction, with nearly 70% of both men and women feeling they cannot dedicate enough time to care (70% of fathers vs. 71% of mothers;  $p = \text{not sig}$ ). In contrast, Italian parents report the lowest dissatisfaction rates (45% of men and 50% of women;  $p = \text{not sig}$ ), potentially reflecting differences in workplace flexibility, support structures, or cultural expectations around caregiving. Spanish parents fall somewhere in between, with 53% of men and 56% of women expressing at least some if not total dissatisfaction ( $p = \text{not sig}$ ).

**The challenge is even more pronounced for parents of young children under five.** Dissatisfaction levels in this group remain high but follow a reverse pattern. In Portugal and Italy, fathers wish they were more involved, with 73% of Portuguese fathers (vs. 64% of mothers) and 41% of Italian fathers (vs. 37% of mothers) taking issue with the amount of time they can spend on care ( $p = 0.054$ ).

*Despite growing conversations around shared caregiving, persistent gendered patterns in care provision remain evident. While men are undoubtedly engaging in care, the gap between perception and reality suggests that structural and social norms still shape how care is distributed, with women shouldering the “second shift” of unpaid domestic labor, often alongside paid work. Changes must go beyond rhetoric, supported by policies that provide concrete support for families—through greater workplace flexibility, expanded care services, and shifts in societal expectations around*

*caregiving. The following sections explore the structural, social, and normative barriers that continue to limit fathers’ full participation in care and the changes needed to create a more equitable care landscape.*

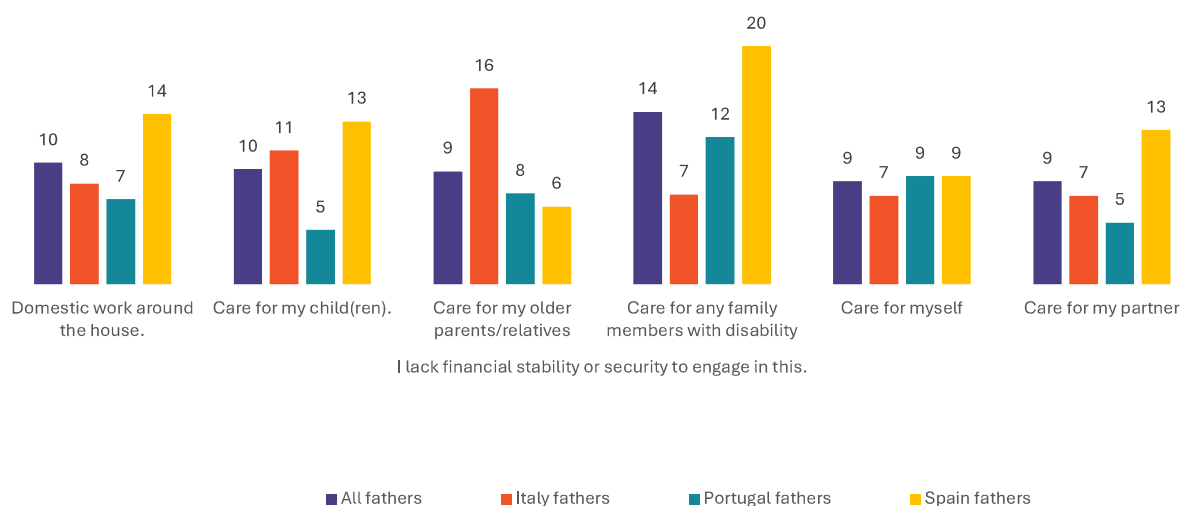
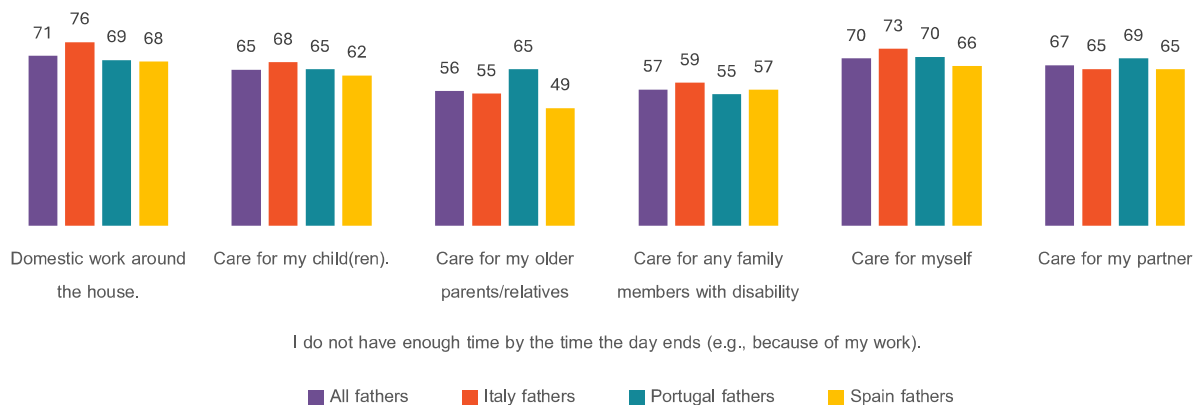
## 2. What are the barriers to engaging in care?

To understand the barriers to caregiving, we asked respondents about the challenges they face in engaging in various types of care work. Specifically, we assessed constraints related to time availability, financial stability, workplace flexibility, and societal expectations. Respondents who expressed dissatisfaction with their ability to provide care ( $n=871$ ) were asked to identify specific obstacles preventing them from dedicating more time to caregiving. Barriers were assessed in relation to different types of care work – domestic work, childcare, elder care, care for family members with disabilities, self-care, and care for partners. Additionally, we explored broader social and structural barriers, including familiar support for caregiving engagement, gendered beliefs about caregiving and workplace policies that may hinder fathers’ participation in care work.

### Resource constraints

**For many parents in Southern Europe, the biggest obstacle to providing care is simple: there is not enough time.** Across all forms of caregiving — whether childcare, housework, elder care, or even self-care — the most cited barrier is time scarcity, largely due to work obligations. Financial insecurity is a secondary but notable constraint, particularly among those providing high-intensity care for elderly relatives or family members with disabilities. See Figure 7.

**Figure 7.** Percent of Southern European fathers, dissatisfied with the amount of time they can devote to care, who agree or strongly agree that resource-scarcity (time and/or financial) is a major barrier to involvement in different types of care.



**For Southern European fathers, the struggle to balance caregiving with work obligations remains acute.** Nearly two-thirds (65%) of fathers who report dissatisfaction with their caregiving capacity cite time constraints as the primary barrier to caring for their children, with the highest rates in Italy (68%) and the lowest in Spain (62%). Similar patterns emerge in elder care and disability care, where over half of fathers (56%) say they simply do not have enough time in the day to tend to their loved ones, a challenge most pronounced among Portuguese fathers (65%), followed by Italian fathers (55%) and Spanish fathers (49%). Women encounter just the same barriers – for both childcare and care for relatives with needs, differences between men’s and women’s reported barriers are not significant.

**Time pressures limit father’s involvement in housework as well.**

Among those fathers dissatisfied with their ability to engage in *household tasks*, 71% cite the lack of time due to work as a major barrier. The challenge is most cited by Italian fathers (76%), followed by Portuguese and Spanish men (69% and 68% respectively), suggesting possible differences in work expectations and household dynamics across countries. Only in Italy do fathers cite time scarcity for performing these care tasks more often than mothers in a notable way (76% vs 61%;  $p = 0.013$ ).

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## Struggle to Balance Work and Caregiving

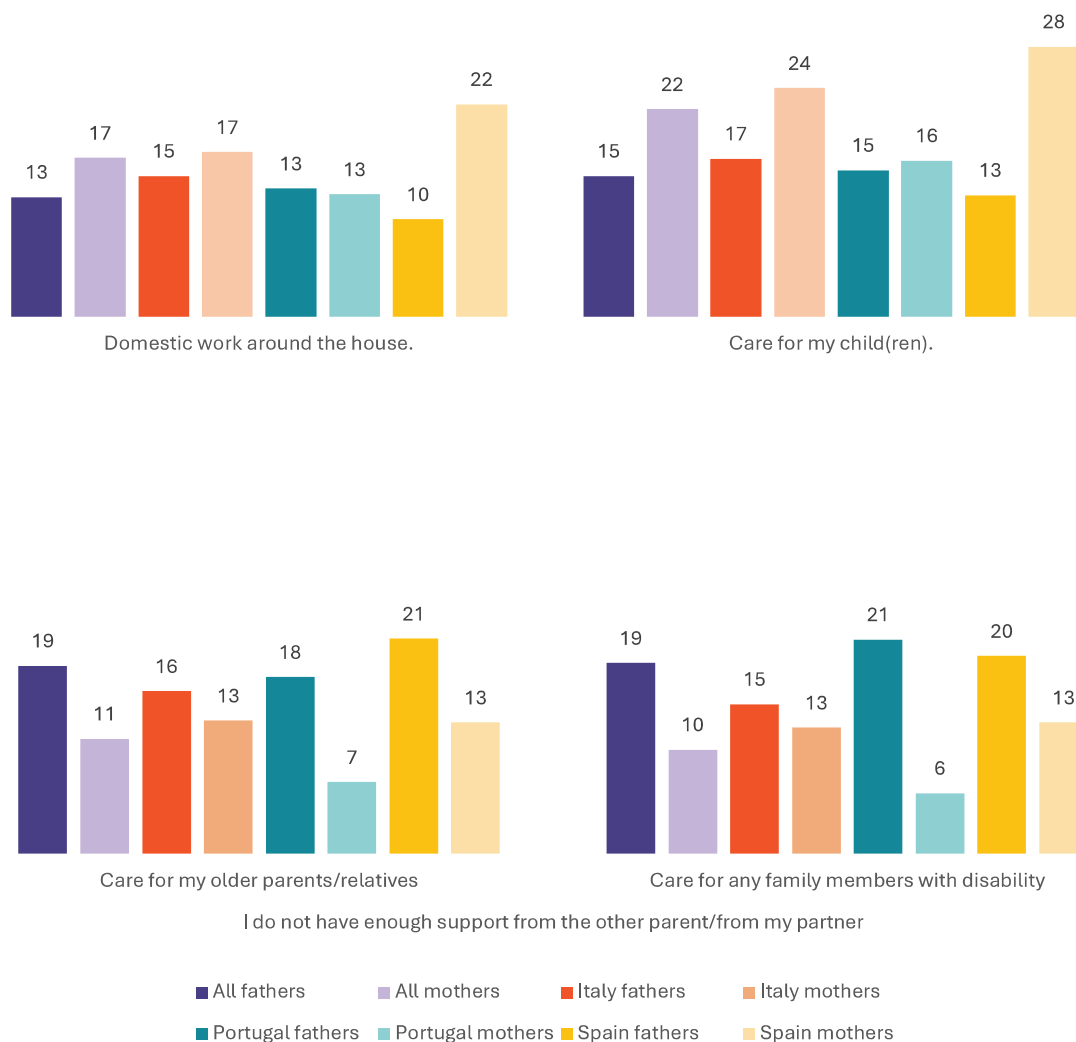
Southern European fathers continue to face significant challenges in balancing caregiving responsibilities with work demands. Among those who express dissatisfaction with their ability to care for their children, nearly 65% identify lack of time as the main obstacle.

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## Lack of social support

**Beyond time and financial constraints, many parents in Southern Europe cite lack of social support—either from partners or extended family—as a significant barrier to their caregiving responsibilities.** Among dissatisfied parents, one in five mothers and one in six fathers find it harder to engage in childcare because of lacking support from their partner (22% vs. 15%;  $p = 0.007$ ). Similarly, one in six women and one in eight men report insufficient partner support as a barrier to household work (17% vs. 13%;  $p = \text{not sig}$ ). These disparities are most evident in Spain, where 22% of mothers—twice the proportion of fathers—identify lack of partner support as a key constraint for housework ( $p = 0.006$ ) and childcare (28% vs. 13%;  $p = 0.001$ ). Interestingly, although women disproportionately take on caregiving roles, men who engage in intensive elder or disability care are slightly more likely than women to cite lack of partner support as a barrier—19% vs. 11% in elder care and 19% vs. 10% in disability care—suggesting they may feel insufficiently supported by their partners or families. See Figure 8.

**Figure 8.** Percent of Southern European fathers and mothers overall and per country, dissatisfied with the amount of care they can provide, who agree or strongly agree that lack of support from other parent/partner is a barrier to involvement in different types of care.

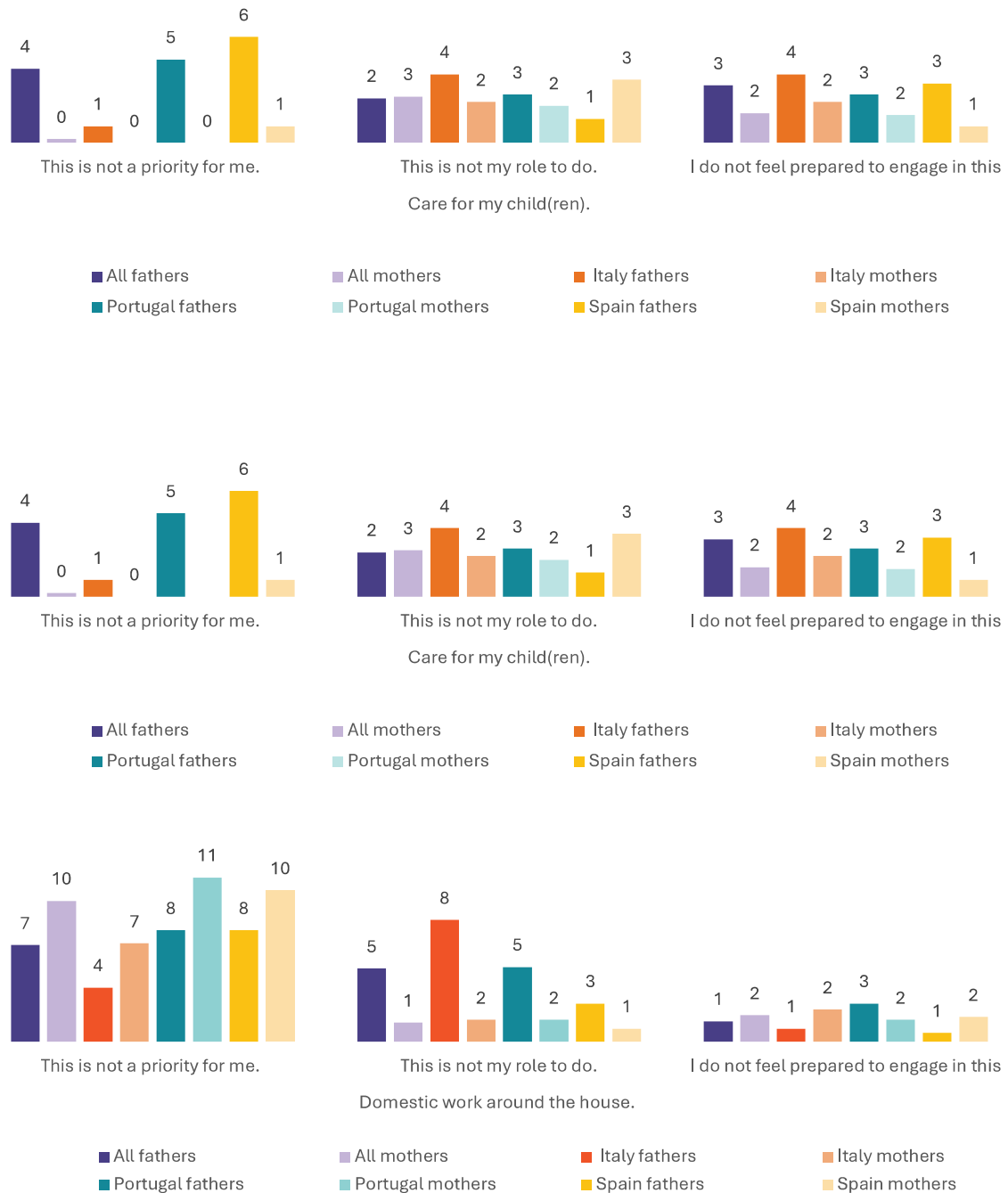


### Attitudes toward Care and Gender Norms

Across various forms of caregiving, few fathers adhere to gender beliefs that would act as significant barriers to engaging in care, and nearly none reject their responsibility for care. A very small percentage of respondents (2-4%) said that they consider childcare

"not their role", that they "do not feel prepared to engage" in care for their children, or that it is "not a priority" for them. Gender differences were still significant, but only in responses to the question about prioritizing care for children. See Figure 9.

**Figure 9.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall and per country, dissatisfied with the amount of care they can provide, who agree or strongly agree with attitudes around their role or preparedness for childcare and housework.



## Promoting emotionally connected fatherhood



### Fathers Rock

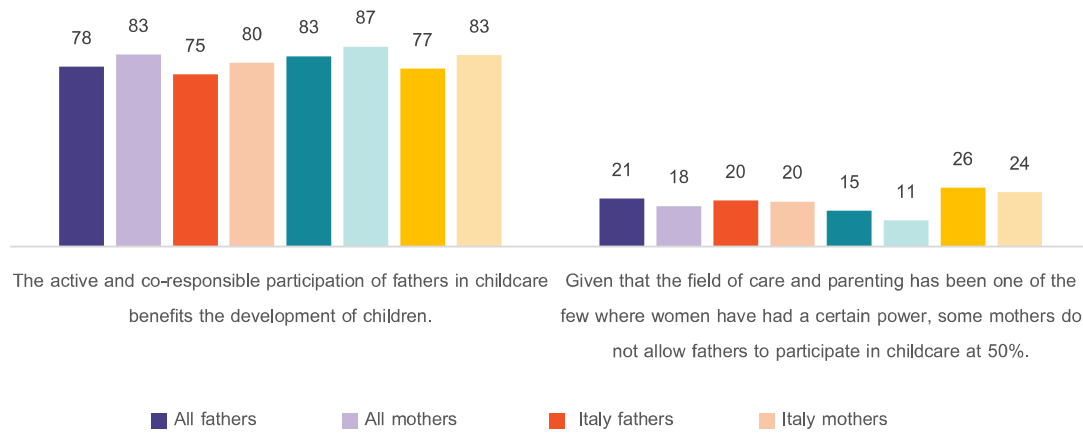
**Fathers Rock** promotes the involvement of men in perinatal care and parenting as a pathway to child well-being, healthy relationships, and the prevention of gender-based violence. By strengthening men's emotional and social skills, engaging key public institutions, and building the capacity of frontline professionals, the project supports fathers in embracing caring roles and accountability. It developed a multi-agency intervention model, co-designed with perinatal and early childhood professionals, and delivered a capacity-building program to help services identify, respond to, and refer cases of domestic violence.

**Rejecting housework as a parental duty is also rare.** While 7% of fathers and 10% of mothers say housework is not a priority for them, only a small fraction (5% of fathers and 1% of mothers) reject it as their role. Notably, the proportion of fathers in Italy who consider housework "not their role" is significantly higher than mothers' (8% vs. 2%;  $p = 0.002$ ; Italy-specific  $p = 0.012$ ). However, this remains a minority view. A negligible proportion of respondents — just 1% of fathers and 2% of mothers—feel unprepared to do housework, suggesting that skill or confidence is not perceived as a major barrier.

Beyond the perspectives of dissatisfied parents, the survey explored broader attitudes toward engaged fatherhood, the willingness to reduce work commitments for caregiving, and support for traditional gender roles and rigid masculinity norms in relation to care.

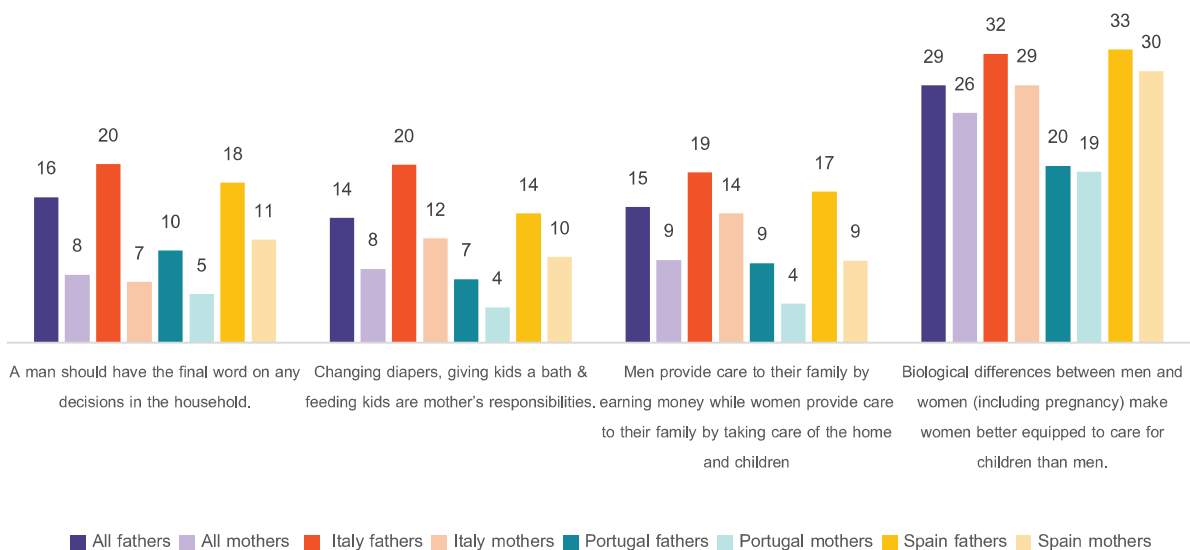
**In terms of support for traditional gender roles, there is strong agreement that fathers' active and co-responsible participation in childcare benefits children's development.** (78% of men, 83% of women,  $p = 0.010$ ). This consensus is highest in Portugal (83% of men, 87% of women). Roughly one in five men and women agree that caregiving has historically been one of the few areas where women have power and that some mothers prevent fathers from participating equally (21% vs. 18%;  $p = \text{not sig}$ ). Agreement is highest in Spain, while Portuguese respondents report the lowest levels of agreement with this view. See Figure 10.

Figure 10. Percent of fathers and mothers overall and per country, who agree or strongly agree with different attitudes.



In line with this, support for essentialist and traditional gender norms remains relatively low but varies across countries. Only 16% of men and 8% of women agree that "a man should have the final word on household decisions," but the gender difference is significant across all countries ( $p < 0.001$ ). Italian men are the most likely to agree (20%,  $p < 0.001$ ), while support in Portugal is significantly lower ( $p = 0.043$ ) and marginal in Spain ( $p = 0.05$ ). Similarly, only 14% of men and 8% of women believe that diaper-changing, bathing, and feeding are exclusively mothers' responsibilities ( $p < 0.001$ ), with this view being most prevalent in Italy ( $p = 0.011$ ). Beliefs in an economic division of labor—where men provide financially while women care for the home and children—are held by 15% of men and 9% of women ( $p < 0.001$ ), with a notable gender gap in Portugal ( $p = 0.040$ ) and Spain ( $p = 0.014$ ). The most persistent traditional belief concerns biological essentialism, with 29% of men and 26% of women agreeing that biological differences make women better suited for caregiving. Taken together, 38% of men and 31% of women hold at least one of these traditional beliefs ( $p = 0.003$ ), with the strongest gaps seen in Italy (45% vs. 36%;  $p = 0.05$ ). See Figure 11.

Figure 11. Percent of fathers and mothers overall and per country, who agree or strongly agree with different attitudes.

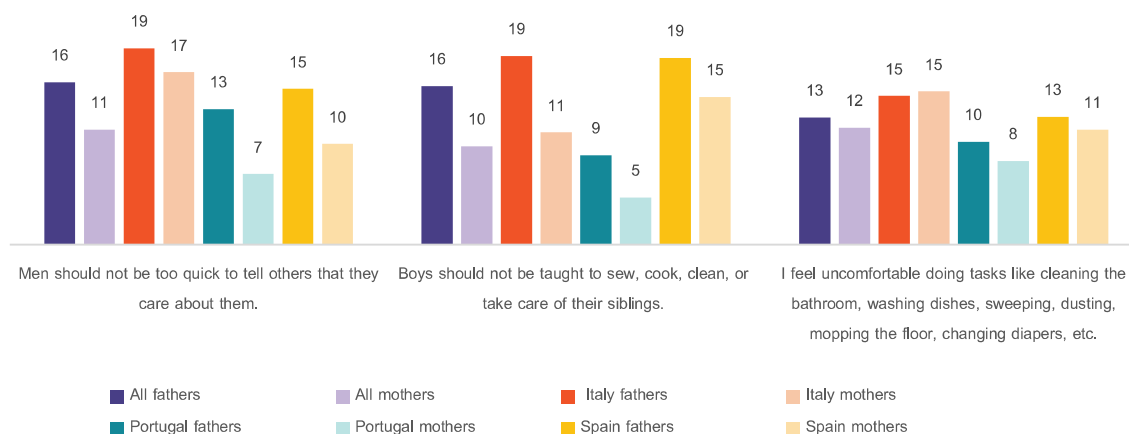


**Adherence to rigid masculinity norms — i.e., socially enforced expectations that define masculinity through traits like dominance, emotional suppression, and self-reliance, often discouraging behaviors associated with vulnerability or caregiving (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) — is somewhat prevalent, though endorsement of individual attitudes is low.** Around one in six men and one in ten of women agree that "men should not be too quick to express care for others," with a significant difference across gender (16% vs. 11%;  $p = 0.008$ ). Similar proportions of men and women agree that "boys should not be taught to sew, cook, clean, or care for siblings," with a significant overall gender gap (16% vs. 10%;  $p = 0.001$ ). Discomfort with housework tasks is also expressed by 13% of men and 12% of women, this time showing no strong gendered differences. However, when considering all three rigid masculinity norms together, still around one in four men and women endorse at least one (28% vs. 24%;  $p = 0.058$ ), with Portugal showing the strongest difference ( $p = 0.049$ ). See Figure 12.

**Regression analysis, used to examine factors associated with adherence to traditional gender roles and rigid masculine norms, suggest that gender, age, and economic conditions are key drivers.** Men’s odds of endorsing traditional gender roles are 41% higher than women’s ( $OR = 1.41, p = 0.003$ ); and 27% higher when it comes to endorsing rigid masculine norms ( $OR = 1.27, p = 0.05$ ). Younger individuals exhibited weaker adherence to both sets of beliefs, with each additional year of age associated with a small but significant decline ( $OR = 0.98, p = 0.012-0.001$ ). This is in line with global trends highlighted in the *State of the World’s Fathers 2023*, which found that younger generations are more inclined toward gender-equal caregiving, driven by exposure to progressive norms and education (Equipundo, 2023). Economic hardship also played a significant role in predicting support for traditional norms, with individuals experiencing financial strain 31-40% more likely to support gendered roles and rigid forms of masculinity ( $OR = 1.31-1.41, p = 0.05-0.01$ ). In contrast, education, country, and region showed no significant associations, suggesting that broader structural factors may not be the primary drivers of these attitudes.

**While attitudes toward engaged fatherhood and caregiving responsibilities show broad support, the relationship between gender beliefs and reported caregiving behaviors reveals only small differences in care engagement.** Parents who support engaged fatherhood are only slightly more likely to engage in some childcare than those who do not (90% vs. 86% for men, 91% vs. 84% for women;  $p < 0.05$ ), with minor variations across countries. These differences, though statistically significant in some cases, are of small magnitude. Similarly, holding traditional gender attitudes does not correspond with large differences in caregiving, save for among more conservative women — those who agree with essentialist gender norms— who, as expected, report engaging in more childcare than their egalitarian counterparts (96% vs. 90%;  $p = 0.029$ ).

Figure 12. Percent of fathers and mother overall and per country, who agree or strongly agree with different attitudes.



However, a notable outlier emerges in Italy, where men who endorse rigid masculinity norms paradoxically report the highest levels of high-intensity childcare (11.8% vs. 2.5% for those rejecting these norms;  $p < 0.05$ ). This contradicts expectations and suggests either a discursive misalignment—where men with traditional masculinity beliefs claim high care involvement without a corresponding shift in behaviors—or an alternate framing of what constitutes “care” within this group. Given that Italian men also have lower parental leave uptake rates, this raises questions about whether their reports reflect actual caregiving responsibilities or rhetorical positioning to align with shifting societal expectations. Further analysis is needed to determine whether their reported engagement aligns with actual caregiving practices.

*The current valuation of barriers overall tells us that practical constraints—especially time scarcity, workplace inflexibility, and limited social support—outweigh ideological resistance in shaping caregiving behaviors. While attitudes toward engaged fatherhood and shared caregiving are largely supportive, systemic factors continue to restrict men’s participation, reinforcing traditional divisions of care. Moreover, discursive shifts toward progressive norms may obscure the reality that actual caregiving engagement does not always align with reported attitudes, particularly among men who endorse rigid masculinity yet claim high involvement. Addressing these barriers requires policy interventions that reduce work-care conflicts, financial incentives for caregiving, and stronger institutional support, rather than relying solely on shifting social norms.*

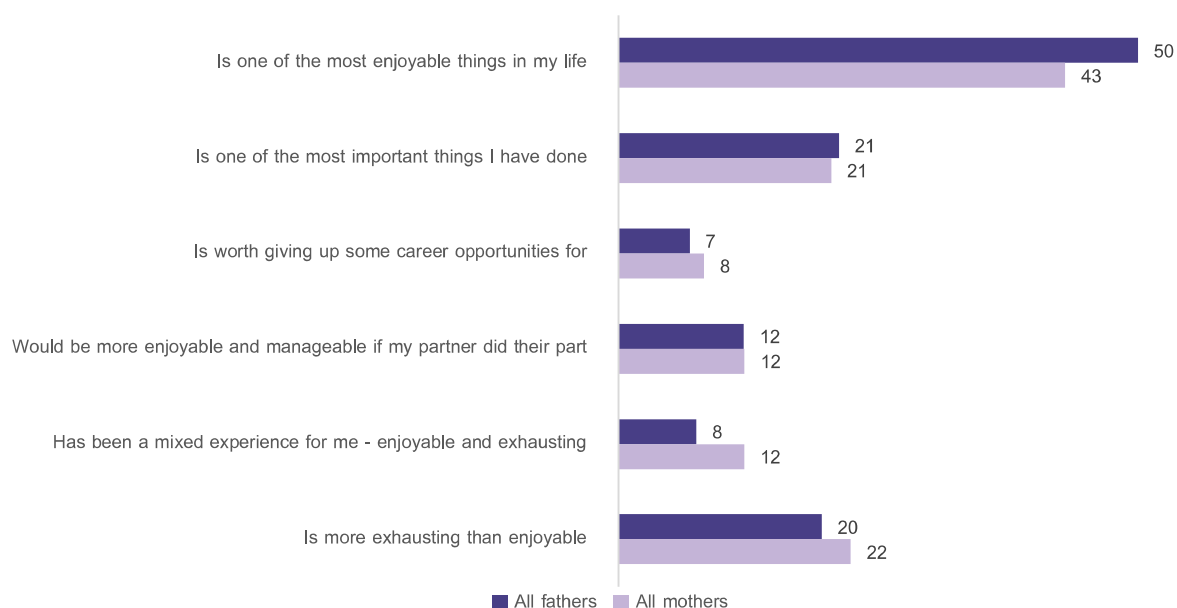
### 3. What is the impact of caregiving involvement?

The role of fathers in caregiving is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in shaping work-life balance, well-being, and overall family dynamics. This section examines how fathers' engagement in caregiving impacts their professional lives, mental health, and satisfaction with relationships (including with family, partner, children and work), while also addressing the challenges associated with balancing work and care responsibilities.

#### Life Satisfaction and Well-being

Caregiving emerges as one of the most fulfilling aspects of parents’ lives, with the majority of fathers and mothers emphasizing its joy over its challenges. When asked to select the statement that best reflects their caregiving experience, half of fathers and 43% of mothers identified “Caring for my children is one of the most enjoyable things in my life” as the most accurate description. This stands in contrast to only 22% of mothers and 20% of fathers who primarily associate caregiving with exhaustion. Yet, the data also highlights the complexity of caregiving, with 12% of fathers and mothers describing it as a mixed experience—both rewarding and exhausting in equal measure. Additionally, one in eight parents (12%) believe their caregiving experience would be more enjoyable and manageable if their partner contributed more equally. See Figure 13.

**Figure 13.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall, who identify each statement as “most accurate” on an accuracy scale from 1 to 5.



### Most parents view caregiving as both meaningful and exhausting.

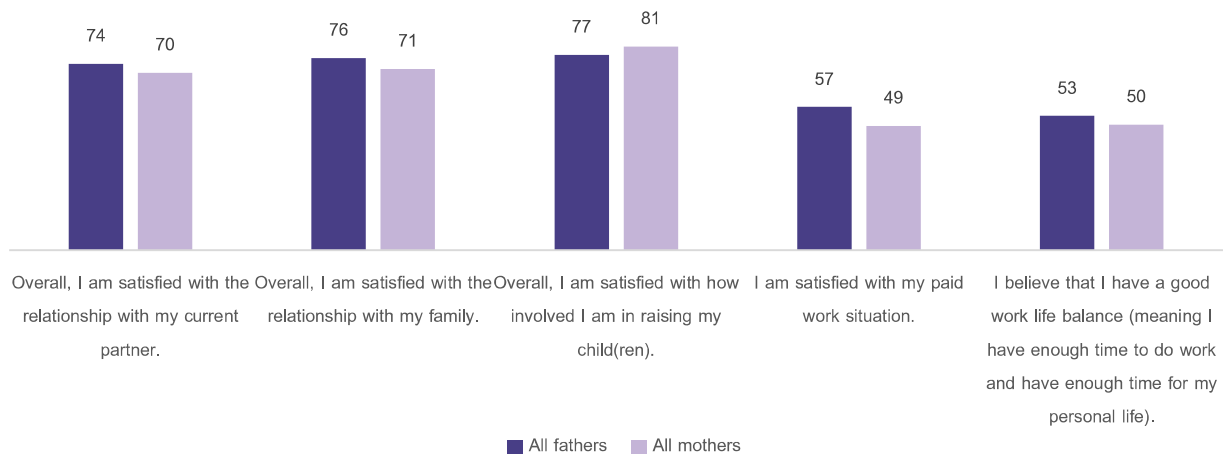
78% of men and 83% of women believe that fathers’ active involvement benefits children’s development—with especially high support in Portugal. Half of fathers and 43% of mothers say caregiving is one of the most enjoyable parts of life, though 12% of both describe it as equally fulfilling and exhausting.

**Across Southern Europe, fathers report consistently high satisfaction with family dynamics and caregiving involvement, though significant gender disparities emerge in key areas such as paid work satisfaction and work-life balance.** For instance, fathers report high levels of satisfaction with their own caregiving involvement, with 77% expressing contentment in how engaged they are in raising their children – a level comparable to mothers’ (81%) with little variation across countries. Among partnered parents, 74% of fathers and 70% of mothers report being satisfied with their relationship with their current partner; and around three out of four parents report satisfaction with their relationship with family (76% of men vs. 72% of women,  $p = \text{not sig}$ ).

**In contrast, satisfaction with paid work presents a clearer gender divide.** Just 57% of fathers and 49% of mothers report being satisfied with their work situation ( $p = 0.017$ ), with Italian mothers reporting the widest satisfaction gap with their male counterparts (39% vs. 53%,  $p = 0.013$ ). This pattern suggests that work expectations and caregiving responsibilities intersect in ways that disproportionately affect women’s professional well-being. Work-life balance

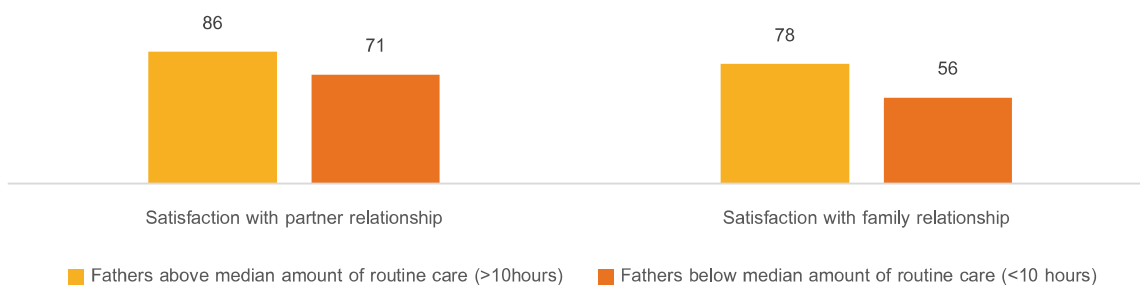
satisfaction follows a similar trajectory, with 53% of fathers and 50% of mothers stating that they feel they have enough time to balance work and personal responsibilities. See Figure 14.

**Figure 14.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall, who agree or strongly agree with statements about overall satisfaction with different areas of life.



**Interestingly, fathers who more actively participate in caregiving report higher satisfaction levels in key relational areas.** For instance, fathers who spend at least ten hours per week (the average amount for men, based on our data) engaged in caregiving or housework tasks report a 15% higher partner satisfaction rate compared to those with a more minimal involvement (86% vs. 71%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, a higher satisfaction rate is reported among fathers involved more than average regarding their self-assessed relationship with their family (78% vs. 56%;  $p = 0.003$ ). The results suggest that while structural barriers may limit fathers' ability to take on caregiving responsibilities, those who do engage in caregiving tend to derive a strong sense of fulfillment from it. See Figure 15.

Figure 15. Percent of fathers above and below average childcare + housework involvement reporting on satisfaction with relational life.

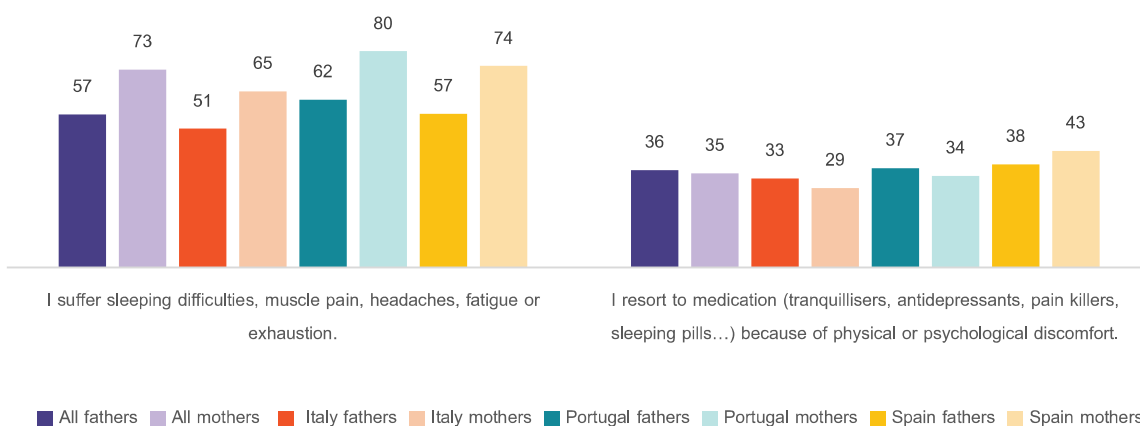


### Health Impacts of Caregiving

While emotionally and relationally fulfilling, the physical and psychological toll of caregiving is evident in the prevalence of personal ailments among parents in Southern Europe, with significant gender disparities emerging across all three countries. Across all three countries, 57% of fathers and 73% of mothers report experiencing symptoms such as sleeping difficulties, muscle pain, headaches, fatigue, or exhaustion ( $p < 0.001$ ). These gender disparities are consistent across countries but are particularly pronounced in Portugal and Spain, where nearly 80% of mothers experience these ailments compared to 62% of fathers ( $p < 0.001$ ). In Italy, the gap is somewhat smaller but still significant, with 65% of mothers vs. 51% of fathers reporting these symptoms ( $p = 0.002$ ).

Medication use due to physical or psychological discomfort also presents a concerning magnitude. Overall, 36% of fathers and 35% of mothers indicate they resort to medication such as tranquilizers, antidepressants, painkillers, or sleeping aids. The highest rates of medication use are found in Spain, where 43% of mothers and 38% of fathers rely on such interventions, compared to 29% of Italian mothers and 33% of Portuguese mothers. See Figure 16.

Figure 16. Percent of fathers and mothers, overall and per country, who report different health ailments with relatively high frequency – sometimes, often or all the time.



## Work-Life Balance

**Balancing work and family responsibilities remains a persistent challenge for parents across Southern Europe. The data highlight notable gendered patterns in how fathers and mothers manage caregiving and work-related demands during and outside of work hours.** Fathers report significantly lower engagement in caregiving during work hours compared to mothers. Across all three countries, 31 percent of fathers indicate that they often or always must manage family and care responsibilities while working, compared to 39 percent of mothers who have to endure distractions ( $p < 0.001$ ). Comparatively, this contrast in work focus is most pronounced in Italy (27% of fathers vs. 40% of mothers;  $p = 0.003$ ). These findings reinforce previous research indicating that while structural and workplace barriers limit fathers' caregiving time, mothers remain the default caregivers even when employed full-time. This is particularly relevant in a post-COVID world where work-from-home arrangements are still common.

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### The Work–Caregiving Struggle Is Real—and Unequal

Balancing work and caregiving is a major challenge for both parents, with **53% of fathers and 50% of mothers** dissatisfied with the time they have for both.

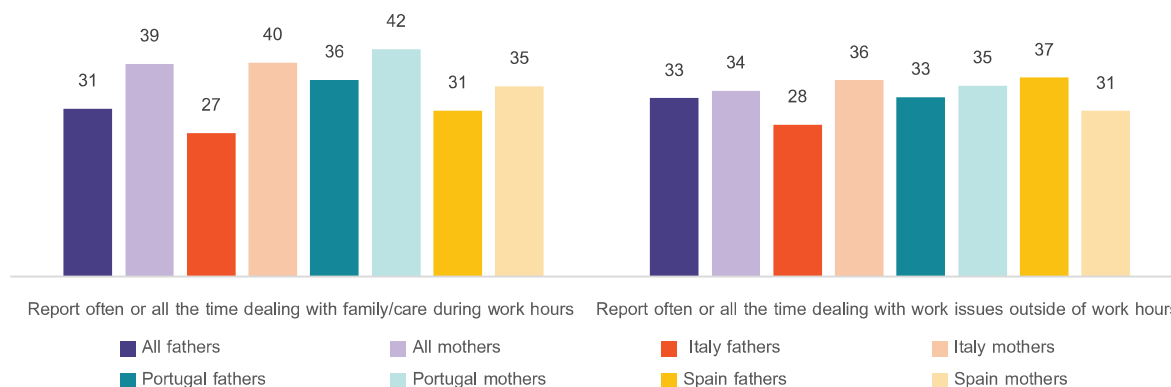
But **mothers bear a heavier burden**, reporting more stress, exhaustion, and health issues.

During work hours, **39% of mothers vs. 31% of fathers** say they often juggle caregiving—showing women are more frequently pulled in multiple directions. The career impact is also greater for women. **32% say parenting has negatively affected their career (vs. 26% of men).**

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**Work-related demands extending beyond official work hours affect both fathers and mothers at comparable rates, though country-level variations are evident.** Overall, 33 percent of fathers and 34 percent of mothers report frequently dealing with work issues outside of work hours ( $p = \text{not sig}$ ). Italian mothers are more likely to remain engaged with work demands after hours compared to fathers, with 28 percent of fathers and 36 percent of mothers experiencing this challenge ( $p = 0.058$ ). See Figure 17.

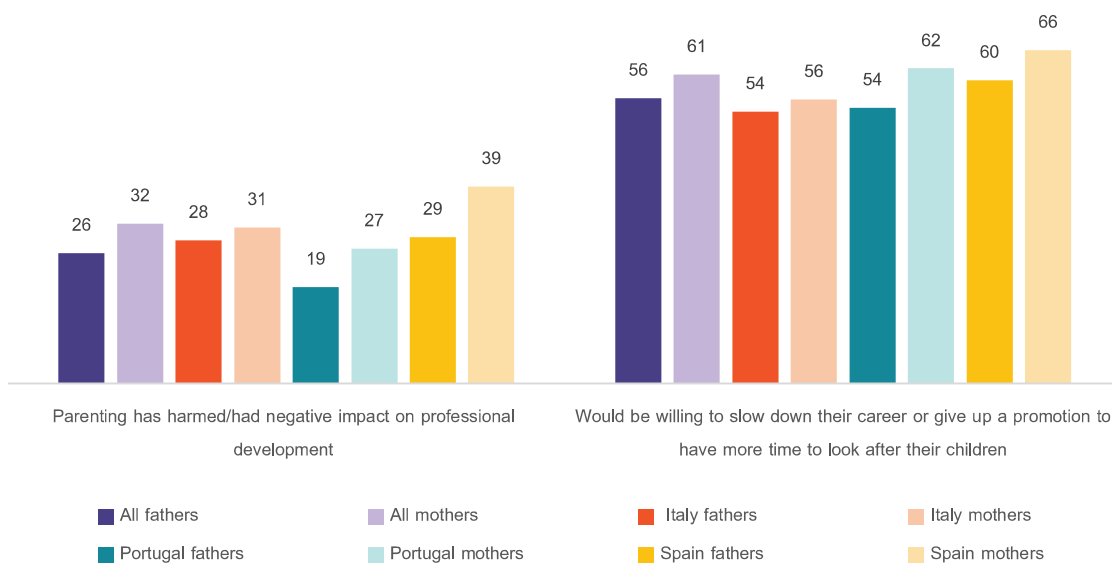
Figure 17. Percent of fathers and mothers, overall and per country, who report incursions of work into life and vice versa.



**Another source of tension between caregiving and professional life are perceptions of career impact.** More than one fourth of fathers and almost a third of mothers believe that parenting has negatively affected their professional development (26% vs. 32%;  $p = 0.013$ ), with notable significant differences between men and women in Portugal ( $p = 0.045$ ) and Spain ( $p = 0.019$ ).

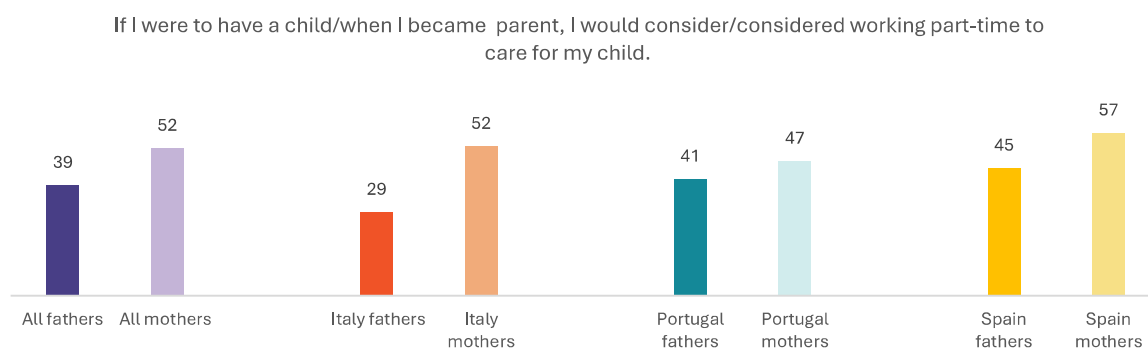
Despite these challenges, parents continue to prioritize caregiving over career progression. More than half of fathers (56%) and 61% of mothers express a willingness to slow down their careers or forgo promotions to dedicate more time to caregiving (a marginal difference;  $p = 0.059$ ). This gender gap is particularly notable in Spain, where 66% of mothers and 60% of fathers express this sentiment, reflecting broader cultural expectations around caregiving roles. See Figure 18.

Figure 18. Percent of fathers and mothers, overall and per country, who agree or strongly agree with statement on career impact.



**These findings resonate with reports of willingness to reduce work commitments.** Over half of mothers say they would consider working part-time for childcare vs. just under two-fifths of fathers (52% vs. 39%;  $p < 0.001$ ), showing a particularly stark gap in Italy (53% vs. 29%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and Spain (57% vs. 45%;  $p = 0.006$ ). See Figure 19.

**Figure 19.** Percent of fathers and mothers, overall and per country, who agree or strongly agree with the statement “When I became a parent, I considered working part-time to care for my child”.



**Caregiving profoundly shapes parents' well-being, relationships, and work-life balance. While fathers who engage more in caregiving report higher satisfaction, mothers continue to bear a disproportionate burden, leading to greater exhaustion, health strains, and career sacrifices.** Findings from the survey highlight the need for stronger policies that support shared caregiving, workplace flexibility, and gender-equitable family roles to improve well-being and reduce stress for all parents.

### What support structures exist?

Support structures play a crucial role in enabling parents to balance caregiving responsibilities with professional and personal well-being. This section examines the perceived and actual availability of care support structures, including workplace flexibility measures, paid and unpaid parental leave policies, and public and private support services across all three Southern European countries surveyed. Understanding these structures and the barriers to their full utilization is essential for identifying gaps and opportunities to better support families.

## Strengthening health sector to engage fathers



### PARENT Program

The **PARENT** initiative, implemented across four European countries, aimed to transform how healthcare systems engage fathers during pregnancy and early childhood. Rooted in Program P by Promundo, the project trained health professionals to promote equitable caregiving and actively involve men in prenatal and postnatal care. Through a gender-transformative lens, the program challenged healthcare practices that unconsciously excluded fathers—such as addressing only mothers or using maternal names for newborn identification. By fostering self-reflection and critical dialogue among providers, the program led to significant behavior change. Health professionals reported increased confidence in addressing both parents equally and providing guidance on parental leave and childcare engagement. Evaluations using the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale showed measurable shifts in attitudes and practice. PARENT demonstrates how engaging professionals as allies can catalyze broader policy and practice shifts toward inclusive and equitable parenting support systems.

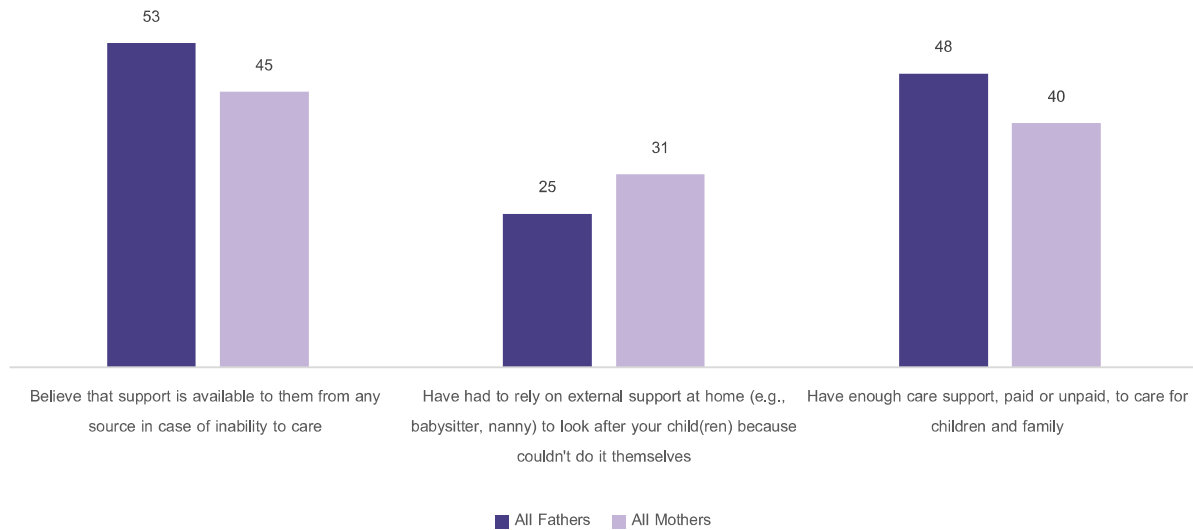
### Parent's perceptions of Care Support Services

As seen earlier, public and private caregiving support services are instrumental in enabling parents to take an active role in caregiving while balancing professional responsibilities. Across Southern Europe, perceived access to childcare and community support networks remains uneven, with notable grievances related to service availability and quality.

**Generally, men are more likely than women to perceive that support is available to them in times of need, while women consistently report greater difficulty in securing adequate caregiving resources** (53% vs. 45%,  $p < 0.001$ ). This disparity is particularly pronounced in Italy, where only 34% of women believe they have access to caregiving support, compared to 46% of men ( $p < 0.001$ ). In contrast, Spain reports the highest levels of perceived availability, with 64% of men and 54% of women stating that they could rely on external support when needed ( $p = 0.047$ ).

Despite these perceptions, the reliance on external private support, such as babysitters or nannies, is relatively limited. One in four fathers (25%) and nearly one in three mothers (31%) report having had to use such services due to their own unavailability ( $p = 0.019$ ). The gender gap in reliance on paid support is particularly evident in Portugal, where 26% of women, compared to 18% of men, have had to seek external caregiving assistance ( $p = 0.056$ ). However, even when external resources are utilized, many parents still feel they lack sufficient caregiving support. Fewer than half of fathers (48%) and just 40% of mothers report having enough paid or unpaid caregiving assistance to adequately meet their family's needs ( $p = 0.002$ ). These concerns are most pronounced in Italy, where only 40% of women and 53% of men feel they have sufficient caregiving support ( $p = 0.004$ ). See Figure 20.

**Figure 20.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall who report perceptions of availability or use of care support services.



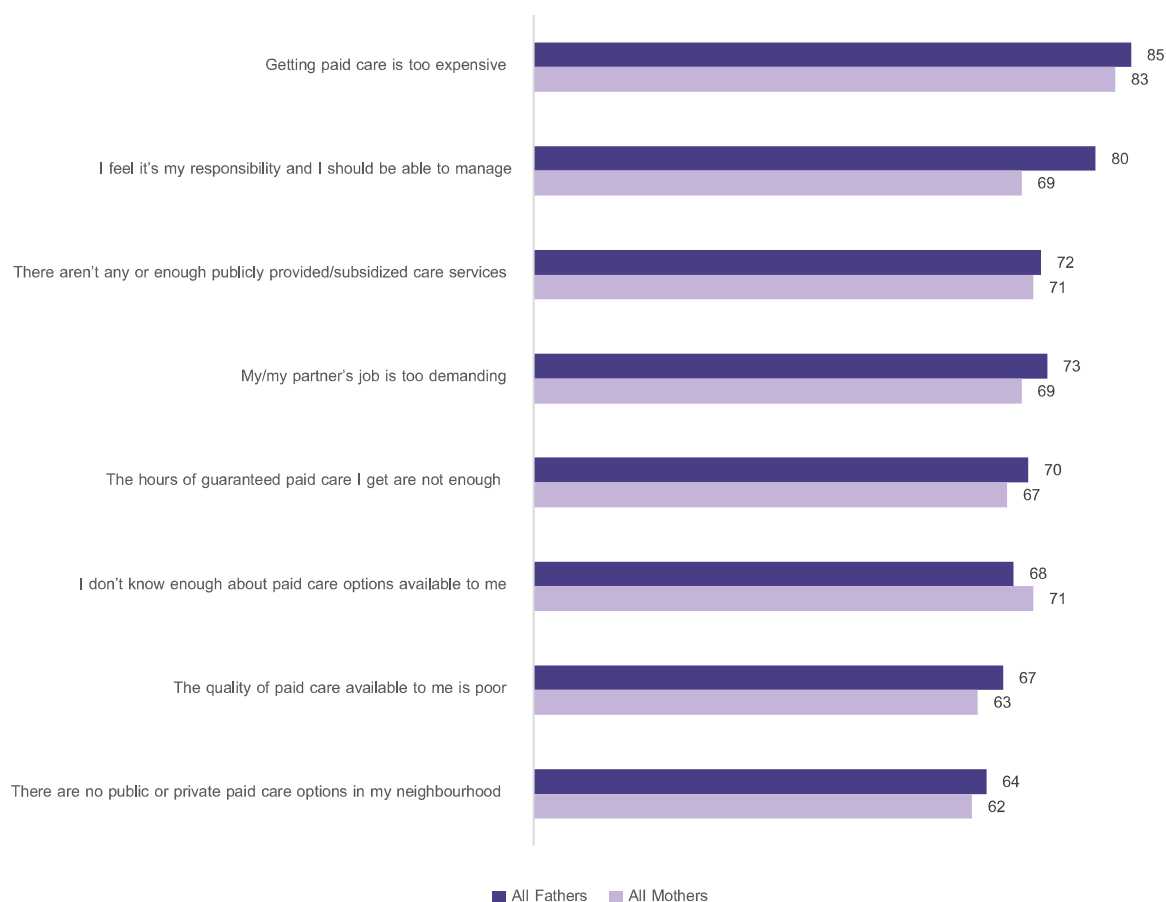
Parents were also asked about a few specific grievances in relation to accessing care support, of which the cost of paid childcare remained the most pressing concern for parents across Southern Europe. A striking 85% of fathers and 83% of mothers report that paid care is too expensive, a sentiment particularly pronounced in Spain, where 93% of fathers and mothers cite cost as a major concern. Quality concerns also persist, with 67% of fathers and 63% of mothers expressing dissatisfaction with the standard of paid care available to them. This dissatisfaction is highest in Spain (74% of both fathers and mothers), while Portugal reports the lowest rates of concern (49% of fathers, 45% of mothers). See Figure 21.

## Childcare Support Falls Short for Working Parents

Across Southern Europe, **high childcare costs** are the top concern for parents—**85% of fathers** and **83% of mothers** say paid care is too expensive. **Quality and availability** are also issues: **67% of fathers** and **63% of mothers** are dissatisfied with the standard of care. **64% of fathers** and **62% of mothers** report no suitable options nearby. On top of this, **care hours don't match work schedules**: **70% of fathers** and **67% of mothers** say current paid care hours are insufficient—leaving many without the support they need to balance work and caregiving.

Additionally, **availability of services presents an additional challenge**, with 64% of fathers and 62% of mothers stating that there are no public or private paid care options in their neighborhood. This issue is most pronounced in Spain, where 72% of fathers and 77% of mothers report a lack of available childcare. Similarly, 70% of fathers and 67% of mothers across the region feel that the hours of guaranteed paid care they receive are insufficient, with Spain once again reporting the highest dissatisfaction rates (81% of fathers, 87% of mothers). Also, **lack of information about childcare options further compounds these issues**. Across Southern Europe, 68% of fathers and 71% of mothers state that they do not know enough about the paid care services available to them, with this concern highest in Spain, where 85% of mothers report inadequate awareness. Lastly, **workplace demands also act as a barrier to securing childcare**, with 73% of fathers and 69% of mothers citing job constraints as a limiting factor. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in Spain, where 80% of fathers feel that their work responsibilities interfere with their ability to secure childcare.

**Beyond structural barriers, internalized expectations around caregiving shape parents' perceptions of access to care.** A significant 80% of fathers and 69% of mothers report feeling that caregiving is their personal responsibility and that they should manage without external support ( $p = 0.004$ ), with this sentiment particularly strong in Italy ( $p = 0.028$ ). Meanwhile, 72% of fathers and 71% of mothers across the region agree that there are not enough publicly subsidized childcare services, with dissatisfaction highest in Spain (86% of mothers, 79% of fathers).

**Figure 21.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall who report on care support access and quality grievances.

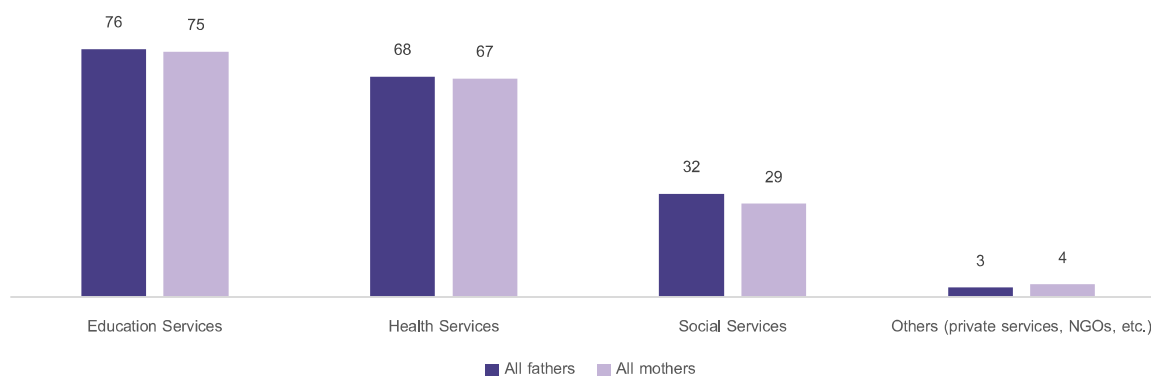
**In fact, rather than formal care services, parents often turn to other sources for support or information regarding childcare and parenting.** The most commonly cited source is family and partners, with 87% of fathers and 89% of mothers ranking them among their top five sources. Friends also play a significant role, particularly in Portugal, where 78% of fathers rely on them for support. Internet and social media are used by two thirds of women, and 60% of men (66% vs. 60%;  $p = 0.012$ ), while about half of parents (47% of fathers vs. 50% of mothers) turn to books and journals for information. Utilization of formal care support services is where we will turn to next.

## Formal Care Support Services

**Parents were asked about the formal care support services—education, health and social services provided by public or private entities— that they may have used to receive parenting or care support.** Across the region, approximately 76% of fathers and 75% of mothers report having made use of education services, making them the most commonly accessed form of formal support. Health services follow closely behind, with 68% of fathers and 67% of mothers reporting utilization. About a third of parents reported contact with care support provided through social services. Other types of support, such as private services and NGO-led programs, remain the least utilized across the region, with fewer than 3% of fathers and 4% of mothers reporting engagement with these services. Only in Italy do

we observe comparatively lower and more gender disparate access to health services (61% vs. 52%,  $p = 0.045$ ), a pattern also apparent in their use of social services (28% of Italian fathers vs. 21%,  $p = 0.049$ ). See Figure 22.

**Figure 22.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall who have used each of four types of care support services to address issues with parenting or child care.



**Among parents who access formal care services, the type of support received varies widely by country and gender.**

Information and advice are the most frequently reported forms of assistance, particularly through education and health services. Nearly 65% of fathers and 67% of mothers report receiving parenting-related guidance through education programs, with similar levels of access to informational support through health services. Social services provide a smaller but still notable share of informational support, though access differs significantly in Italy, where fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to receive this type of guidance (25% vs. 18%,  $p = 0.029$ ). Formal training and capacity-building workshops are another widely accessed form of care support, particularly in Italy, where more than 71% of fathers and 73% of mothers report participating in such programs. In Portugal, however, engagement with these services is lower, particularly among mothers, where only 36% report accessing these opportunities compared to 45% of fathers ( $p = 0.045$ ). Across Southern Europe, gender differences are particularly evident in the use of social services for training, with fathers significantly more likely than mothers to receive this type of support ( $p = 0.005$ ).

## Municipal level intervention for father engagement



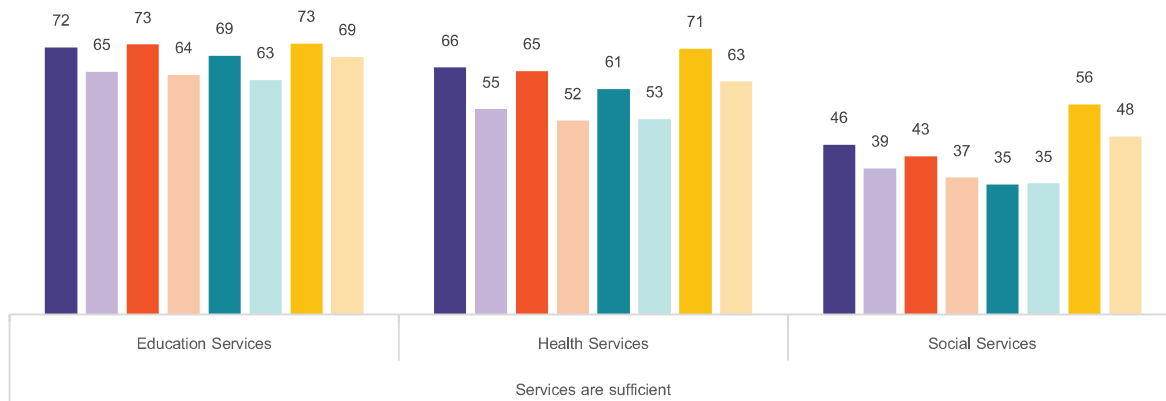
### The Plural Program

Municipal level intervention for fathers [The PLURAL program, led by the Centre de Masculinitats de Barcelona](#) (Barcelona City Council), Spain, challenges traditional norms of masculinity and promotes caring, non-violent, and emotionally connected fatherhood. Rooted in intersectional and rights-based approaches, PLURAL offers a combination of group sessions, mentoring, public campaigns, and one-on-one counseling for men. The program especially targets young men and fathers in vulnerable situations, creating inclusive, non-judgmental spaces where participants can reflect on gender, emotions, and caregiving roles. The program includes a widely used guide for running pre-birth men's groups and has reached over 1,000 men, showing strong participant satisfaction and low dropout rates. PLURAL also works with educators, social workers, and municipal staff to build capacity and awareness around masculinities and care. While still evolving, the program has already shown positive outcomes in shifting attitudes toward gender equality and care responsibility. It represents a powerful example of how municipal-level interventions can contribute to broader social change by transforming how communities understand and support engaged fatherhood.

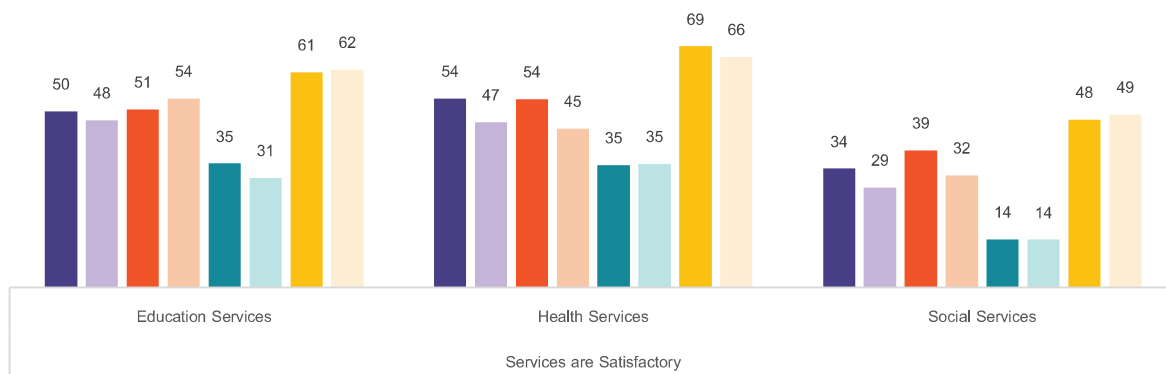
**Formal services also play an important role in providing economic and emotional support to parents.** One in four fathers and mothers report accessing some form of financial assistance for childcare, with support most commonly received through education and health services. However, differences emerge in Portugal, where fathers are more likely to receive economic support through social services than mothers (24% vs. 31%,  $p = 0.051$ ). Emotional and counseling services are also commonly used, particularly within education and health institutions. In Italy, fathers report significantly higher engagement in counseling and emotional support services than mothers (23% vs. 15%,  $p = 0.027$ ). Participation in specific parenting support groups also differs across gender and country. For example, in Spain, fathers are more likely to engage with parenting-related social services than mothers (20% vs. 11%,  $p = 0.012$ ).

**Despite the widespread availability of formal care services, satisfaction with these services varies considerably.** Education services receive the highest satisfaction ratings, with 72% of fathers and 65% of mothers reporting that they consider them sufficient ( $p = 0.006$ ). Similar trends emerge in health services, where 66% of fathers report being satisfied compared to 55% of mothers, with particularly significant differences in Italy ( $p = 0.002$ ) and Spain ( $p = 0.036$ ). Social services, in contrast, receive the lowest satisfaction ratings overall, with only 46% of fathers and 39% of mothers considering them sufficient ( $p = 0.012$ ), highlighting potential gaps in service quality or accessibility. See Figure 23.

**Figure 23.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall who report satisfaction with formal care support services accessed.



■ All fathers ■ All mothers ■ Italy fathers ■ Italy mothers ■ Portugal fathers ■ Portugal mothers ■ Spain fathers ■ Spain mothers



■ All fathers ■ All mothers ■ Italy fathers ■ Italy mothers ■ Portugal fathers ■ Portugal mothers ■ Spain fathers ■ Spain mothers

## Shifting norms in organizational culture



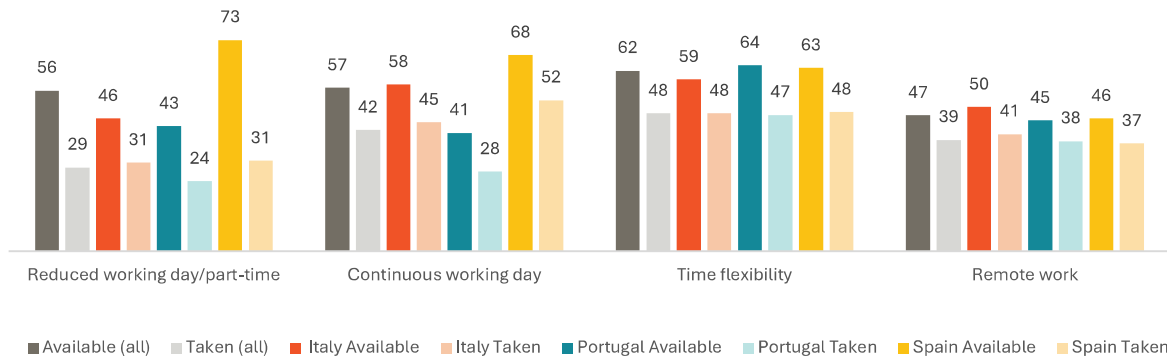
### 4E-Parent: Early, Equal, Engaged, Empathetic

[4E-Parent](#) combines a gender-transformative parenting approach with concrete action to shift workplace cultures. Alongside training for early childhood professionals and advocacy for paternity leave, the project partners with private companies to improve work-life balance and promote caregiving roles for fathers. Collaborating with six companies of varying sizes, 4E-Parent carried out surveys with over 1,000 employees, conducted 30 focus groups, and consulted HR managers to understand barriers and opportunities for shared caregiving. Based on these findings, the program co-developed internal action plans with HR teams—focusing on measures like flexible hours, parental leave uptake, and support for precarious workers. This corporate engagement model not only fosters responsive parenting but also aims to shift organizational culture across sectors

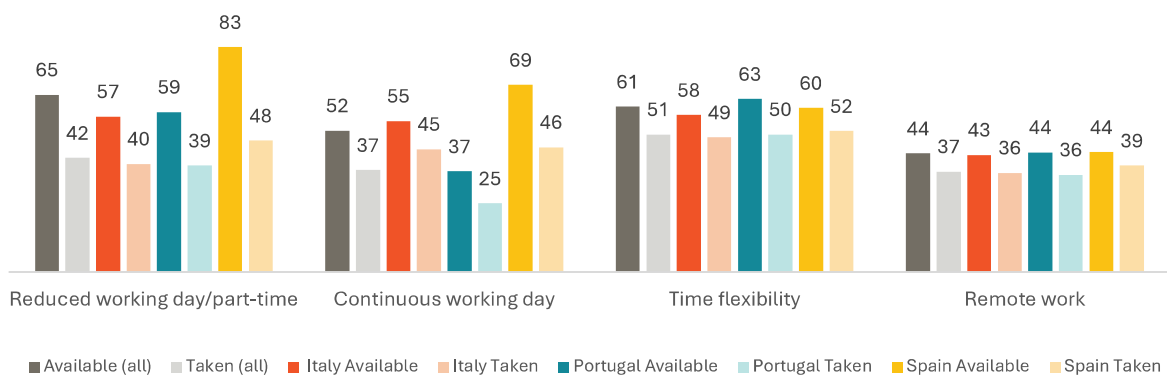
### Workplace Flexibility and Care Support Provisions

**Work-life balance policies, such as reduced working hours, flexible schedules, and remote work, are widely available, but barriers to access persist across different groups.** Of those employed formally at the time of the survey, more women than men report having access to these measures through their employers (65% vs. 56% for reduced working hours,  $p = 0.001$ ), with particularly stark differences in Spain (82% vs. 73%;  $p = 0.024$ ) and Portugal (59% vs. 43%;  $p = 0.001$ ). However, when it comes to actual use, fewer employees—especially men—take advantage of these measures when available. Only 29% of men have used reduced working hours compared to 42% of women ( $p < 0.001$ ), with most significant gaps in Portugal (24% vs. 39%;  $p = 0.001$ ) and Spain (31% vs. 48%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Though not significant, similar patterns emerged in other policies, with time flexibility and remote work being more commonly reported as available but slightly differentially adopted by men and women. See Figures 24 and 25.

**Figure 24.** Percent of employed fathers overall and per country, who report on care-friendly workplace policies available vs. taken.



**Figure 25.** Percent of employed mothers overall and per country, who report on care-friendly workplace policies available vs. taken.

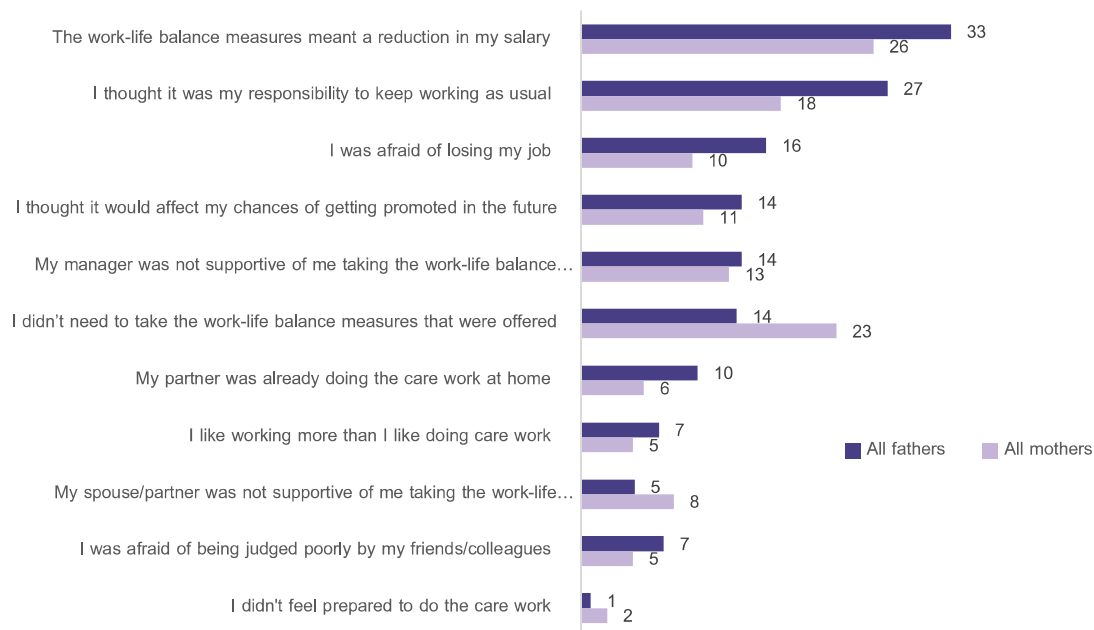


### What holds parents back

When examining the low uptake of existing family support measures, several key barriers emerge—particularly for men. The most frequently mentioned obstacle is financial: 33% of men and 26% of women believe using these measures would lead to a pay cut. Men also more often feel obligated to maintain their regular work routines (27% compared to 18% of women).

**Zooming into the reasons for poor uptake of available measures, there are several barriers that prevent employees—especially men—from using them.** The most commonly cited reason is economic: 33% of men and 26% of women report that taking these measures would reduce their salary. Additionally, men are significantly more likely than women to feel a responsibility to keep working as usual (27% vs. 18%,  $p = 0.009$ ), with this gap particularly strong in Spain (25% vs. 11%;  $p = 0.024$ ). Concerns about job stability also take a stronger toll on men, with 16% of fathers and 11% of mothers fearing that using these measures would lead to losing their job. See Figure 26.

**Figure 26.** Percent of employed fathers and mothers overall, who report different reasons for not taking care-friendly entitlements.



**Few men admitted to social and cultural factors fueling their reluctance to take advantage of care-friendly policies.** Some men reported that their managers (14%) or partners (5%) were unsupportive of them taking leave. Others claim that fear of being judged by colleagues affected 7% of men, compared to just 5% of women. Interestingly, a higher proportion of women than men stated that they "did not need" to take these measures (23% vs. 14%;  $p = 0.009$ ), suggesting that some women feel they can manage caregiving within existing work structures, while men—who may still perceive themselves as secondary caregivers—are less likely to opt in when such policies are available. Also, while small, double the proportion of men vs. women cited their partner already taking care of household responsibilities as a reason for not using these policies (10% vs. 6%;  $p = 0.039$ ) with Portuguese fathers 3.6 times more likely to report this as a reason for poor uptake (10% vs. 3%;  $p = 0.032$ ).

## Paid and Unpaid Parental Leave

**Paid parental leave policies—encompassing paternity and maternity leave, compulsory and voluntary provisions, as well as paid and unpaid leave—exhibit notable differences across Italy, Spain, and Portugal, reflecting varying levels of state support and commitment to promoting gender equality in caregiving.** The European Union Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers (2019/1158) has established minimum standards for parental leave across EU member states, mandating that each parent must have at least four months of leave, of which two months are non-transferable and paid at an adequate level to encourage uptake (European Commission, 2019). While this directive sets a baseline, national policies vary in their implementation and effectiveness in fostering gender-equal caregiving.

### Policies regarding paid leave

Policies regarding paid leave for parents (defined as ‘parental leave’)—encompassing paternity and maternity leave, mandatory and voluntary provisions, as well as paid and unpaid leave - **exhibit notable differences across Italy, Spain, and Portugal, reflecting varying levels of state support and commitment to promoting gender equality in caregiving.** Differences relate to the duration of mandatory leave, the extent to which non-mandatory leave is non-transferable or transferable between parent and how well this leave is paid, all of which affect uptake. The European Union Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers (2019/1158) has established minimum standards for mandatory leave (a minimum of 10 days for fathers), and a minimum at least four months of non-mandatory leave of which at least two should be non-transferable and paid at an adequate level to encourage uptake (European Commission, 2019). While this directive sets a baseline, national policies vary in their implementation and effectiveness in fostering gender-equal caregiving.

Differences relate to the duration of mandatory leave, the extent to which non-mandatory leave is non-transferable or transferable between parent and how well this leave is paid, all of which affect uptake. The European Union Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers (2019/1158) has established minimum standards for mandatory leave (a minimum of 10 days for fathers), and a minimum at least four months of non-mandatory leave of which at least two should be non-transferable and paid at an adequate level to encourage uptake (European Commission, 2019). While this directive sets a baseline, national policies vary in their implementation and effectiveness in fostering gender-equal caregiving.

National policies around leave entitlement vary significantly across the three countries.

- Spain has taken significant steps toward equalizing caregiving responsibilities by granting both parents in the child’s first year 16 weeks of fully paid, non-transferable leave, ensuring fathers have the same opportunity as mothers to care for their children (Institute Jacques Delors, 2022).
- Portugal offers fathers 20 days of mandatory paternity leave, plus an additional eight optional days, all compensated at 100% of their regular salary through social security, to be taken within 42 days of following birth (Safeguard Global, 2023); subsequent non-mandatory leave for parents is entirely transferable.

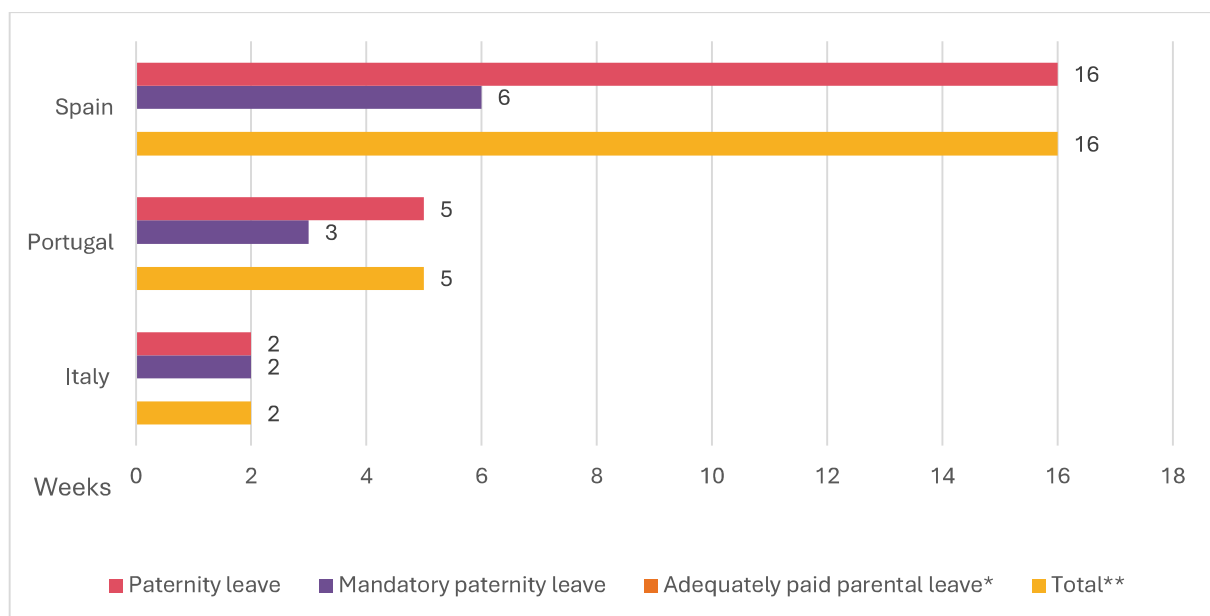
## Workplace Flexibility: Unequal and Underused

Although flexible work options exist, **they’re underused—especially by men: 56% of fathers have access to reduced hours, but only 29% use them.** In contrast, **65% of mothers have access, and 42% use them.** Barriers include financial worries (33%), a sense of obligation to keep working (27%), job security concerns (16%), and fear of judgment at work (7%).

- Italy, by contrast, provides only 10 days of mandatory paid paternity leave to be used within the first 5 months, one of the shortest paternity leave provisions in the EU (OECD, 2023). Subsequent, non-mandatory leave is poorly paid (except for three months that are paid at 80% - none of which, however, is reserved for fathers).

The following figure shows the total amount of adequately paid leave available for fathers in year 1 in the three countries, part of which is mandatory and the rest voluntary. Opportunities for fathers to take leave before the child is one year old is critical for child welfare, father-child bonding and to enable women to return to work. Spanish leave policy focuses on Year 1. In Portugal and Italy fathers can also take non-mandatory leave during Year 1 but in Portugal while the leave is well paid it is all transferable which increases the likelihood that mainly women will use this leave; in Italy the non-mandatory leave is either paid 30% or (for three months) 80% but transferable and therefore tend to be used by mothers to extend their maternity leave. See Figure 27.

**Figure 27.** Amount of well-paid leave (66%+) for fathers: paternity leave and parental leave reserved for fathers.



\*Voluntary leave reserved for fathers

\*\*Paternity leave + adequately paid parental leave

#### Uptake of Leave

Countries do not yet have adequate systems in place to monitor uptake of leave (how much leave is taken by mother and fathers, when and whether at the same time). However, some reliable estimates are available:

**Italy:** The Italian Institute of Social Insurance INPS<sup>2</sup> estimates uptake of paternity leave covered by the State by fathers at 65% on average but with notable geographic variations (from figure over 90% in some provinces in the Northeast and less than 20% in some provinces in the South). Paternity leave tends to be taken more by fathers with stable long-term contracts, and in larger companies (of which there are more in the North). How many of the available ten days are taken is currently not reported. Some companies, mainly large and in north Italy, provide generous paternity leave of which uptake is over 70%. Users of voluntary parental leave which is most paid at 30% are mainly (80%) mothers.

<sup>2</sup> Analysis of gender gaps in the labor market and the pension system through INPS data, 2024.

In recent years payment of three months (transferable) has been raised to 80%. Figures are not yet available on how these better paid months of leave are shared between mothers and fathers.

**Spain:** Regarding the uptake of paid parental leave (PPL) in Spain, Castellanos-Serrano and Recio Alcaide (2025) analyzed data from the “Birth and Childcare Benefits” databases provided by the Spanish National Institute of Social Security, covering leave processes between 2016 and 2023. Based on the most recent data available, the study finds that approximately two out of three mothers are entitled to PPL. Among those eligible, around 99% take the full leave, averaging 112 days. Nearly 95% of mothers use their entire PPL period consecutively. For fathers, about three out of four are entitled to PPL. Of these, over 90% take the full 16-week leave, averaging 110 days of use. Around 50% of fathers take the 16 weeks consecutively, aligning their leave with the mother’s, while about 20% use the 10 flexible weeks for solo caregiving.

On the other hand, in 2022, 9.9% of fathers and 1.8% of mothers used the 10 flexible weeks on a part-time basis (note: the first six weeks must be taken full-time). The rate of part-time use was higher among self-employed individuals: 23.7% of fathers and 9.8% of mothers, respectively (Recio Alcaide, Castellanos-Serrano & Andrés Jiménez, 2024).

**Portugal:** Currently, Portuguese law provides for initial parental leave, which can be up to 150 days and includes mandatory and exclusive periods for each parent, as well as extended leave, which broadens the leave period by an additional three months. Regarding the mother’s exclusive parental leave, Portuguese labor legislation provides an optional period of up to 30 days before childbirth and a mandatory period of 42 days (six weeks) after birth, as stated in Article 41 of the Labor Code.

Regarding the father’s exclusive leave, he can only take this leave after the birth or adoption of the child. Portuguese law establishes 28 consecutive or alternating days of leave, with a minimum of seven days after the birth of the baby. The first seven days must be taken immediately after the birth, and the remaining 21 days must be taken within 42 days of the birth. Additionally, the father is entitled to seven optional working days, consecutive or interpolated, as long as they are taken concurrently with the mother’s initial parental leave (Government of Portugal, 2025).

In December 2024, mothers accounted for 64% of those receiving the initial parental allowance in Portugal, while male beneficiaries accounted for 36%. Compared to the previous month and December 2023, there was a decrease in the number of mothers receiving this allowance (by 1.6% and 0.4%, respectively), while the number of men receiving parental allowance increased by 5.6% and 1.8%, respectively (GEP, 2025). These figures align with the increasing proportion of men receiving parental leave benefits between 2015 and 2022: an increase from 58.1% to 66.4% for optional paternity leave and from 64.8% to 73.5% for compulsory paternity leave. The number of men sharing 120/150 days of leave also increased by 18.1% between 2015 and 2022. However, mothers continue to provide the majority of family care. In 2022, 94.5% of mothers received a 120/150-day leave allowance (9.1% more than in 2015), although it is now on a descent course as the leave taken by mothers decreased by 3.4% between 2020 and 2022 (CIG, 2024).

**In the SOSEF Survey, many fathers and mothers express dissatisfaction with the length of leave available in their countries.** Among fathers, 67% reported that they would have taken a longer leave period in the first months of their child’s life if given the opportunity, with little variation across countries. Overall, 49% of fathers and 64% of mothers consider parental leave to be too short, with significant gender differences ( $p < 0.001$ ). The highest dissatisfaction levels were reported in Portugal, where 66% of fathers and 77% of mothers felt leave was insufficient. In contrast, Italian fathers were the most likely to view the length of leave as adequate (49% vs. 39% of Italian mothers,  $p = 0.014$ ).

**The ability to disconnect from work while on leave remains a challenge.** More than half of fathers (53%) reported at least partial engagement with work responsibilities while on leave, compared to 49% of mothers ( $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern was particularly pronounced in Portugal, where 25% of fathers (vs.17% of mothers) reported being only partially disconnected from work while caring for their newborn ( $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, 27% of fathers and 33% of mothers reported that they were almost completely disconnected from work, with Portuguese mothers most likely to

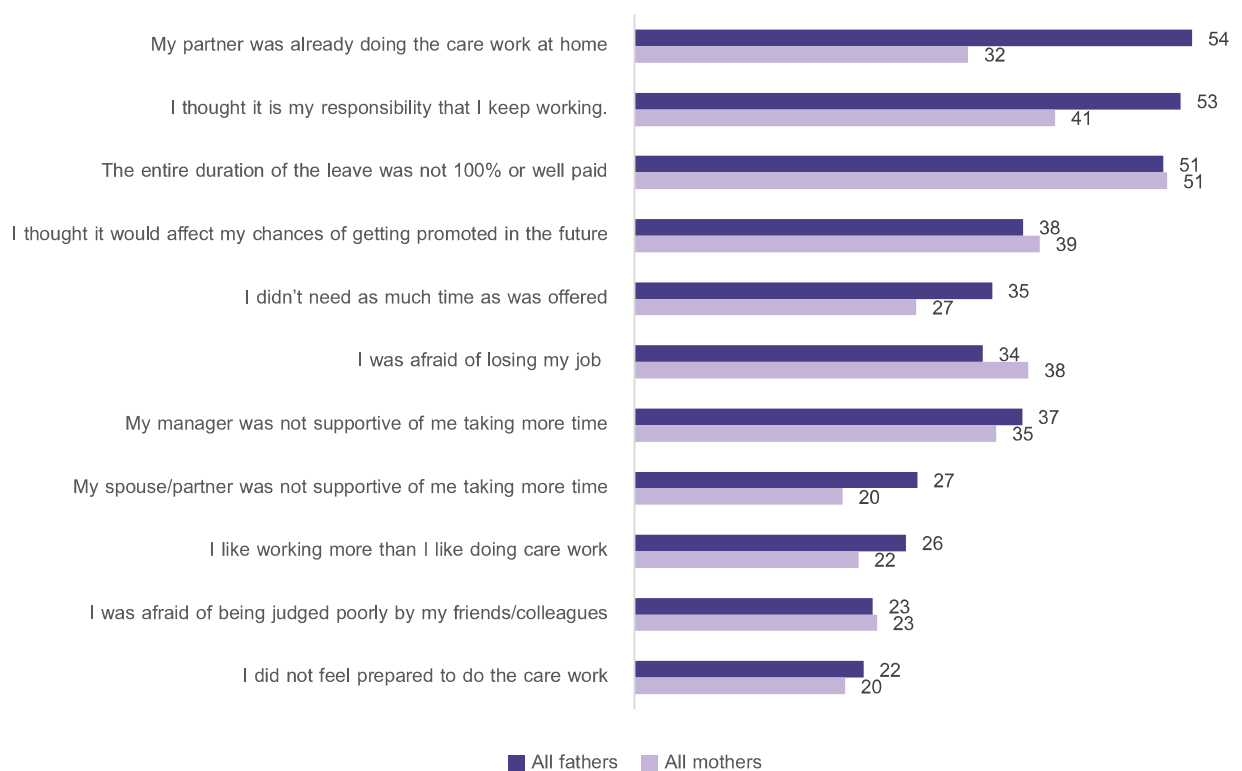
experience full disconnection (44%). Strengthening workplace protections and cultural shifts around caregiving may be necessary to ensure that both fathers and mothers can maximize the benefits of parental leave.

#### Barriers to Paid Parental Leave Uptake

**Echoing earlier findings on care involvement, cited barriers to parental leave uptake reveal persistent gendered norms and economic constraints that influence parents' decisions to forgo or shorten their leave entitlement.**

Among fathers, the most frequently cited reason for taking less leave than available was the belief that they were responsible for continuing to work. Over half of fathers (53%) compared to 41% of mothers endorsed this rationale ( $p = 0.001$ ). Economic factors also played a significant role in parental leave decisions. About half of both mothers and fathers (51%) reported that the entire duration of leave was not fully or well-paid, making extended leave financially unfeasible. Career concerns were also prevalent, with 38% of fathers and 39% of mothers fearing that taking longer leave would hurt their chances of future promotion. See Figure 28.

**Figure 28.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall reporting on main barriers to full uptake of their parental leave entitlement.



**Concerns about workplace culture and social perceptions further influenced leave uptake.** Over a third of fathers and mothers (37% vs. 35%) cited a lack of managerial support for taking longer leave, and 23% of both fathers and mothers feared negative judgment from colleagues or friends. Household gender roles also shaped leave-taking behavior, particularly for fathers, with 54% of fathers and 32% of mothers saying they took less leave because their partner was already managing the care work at home. Additionally, some fathers reported feeling unprepared for caregiving duties, with 22% of fathers and 20% of mothers stating they lacked confidence in their caregiving abilities.

**Across all three countries, fathers are generally met with approval when extending their leave beyond the compulsory period, yet pockets of resistance and indifference remain.** Community attitudes toward fathers' uptake of voluntary parental leave are overall high, with 79% of fathers who took optional leave beyond the compulsory period reporting that their environment (family, friends, etc.) was either in favor or very much in favor of their decision. However, notable differences emerge across countries in the level of support fathers perceive. Italy showed the highest level of perceived disapproval among the three countries ( $p = 0.021$ ), with only 39% of fathers reported their community (family, friends etc.) was very much in favor of their leave-taking (vs. 50% in Portugal and 44% in Spain;  $p = 0.021$ ). Meanwhile, 15% of Italian fathers perceived indifference (vs. 8% in Portugal and 17% in Spain) and 9% felt outright opposition (vs. 12% in Portugal and 2% in Spain). So, while Portugal shows strong acceptance overall, resistance persists among a small but notable segment of fathers' social networks.

**Lastly, a substantial portion of parents across Southern Europe remain unaware of their rights regarding childcare leave.** While 70% of fathers reported knowing their entitlements, at least 25% of parents in every country surveyed stated they were not aware of their leave rights, highlighting a gap in information and access that deters correct leave utilization.

## Fathers champion shared caregiving



### AÇEV's BADEP Father Support Program

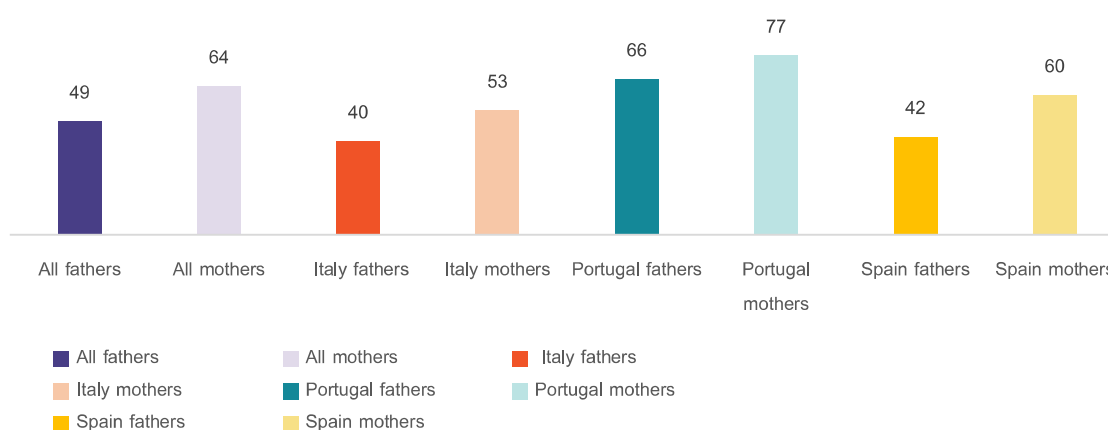
Since 1996, AÇEV's Father Support Program (BADEP) has empowered fathers across Türkiye to play a more active, nurturing role in their children's lives. Grounded in child development science and responsive to cultural and societal shifts, the program supports fathers in strengthening emotional bonds, adopting positive discipline, and engaging equitably in caregiving. Delivered through community-based group sessions led by trained facilitators, BADEP promotes self-reflection, emotional communication, and awareness of gender roles. Long-term evaluations show changes in attitudes, improved family dynamics, and increased father-child interaction. Notably, many program graduates have become advocates for involved fatherhood, extending the program's reach and impact through local grassroots action. BADEP's longstanding success showcases how community-rooted, evidence-based programs can contribute to systemic change, influence national narratives on fatherhood, and promote gender-equitable parenting practices.

#### Attitudes about Leave-Taking

**Attitudes toward equal parental leave for mothers and fathers reveal strong support for gender parity in caregiving, though opinions diverge on how this should be implemented.** Among fathers, 66% agree that leave should be equal because fathers and mothers have the same rights and responsibilities in childcare and domestic work. Support for

this principle is highest in Spain (73%) and Portugal (63%), while Italy shows significantly lower agreement at 61% ( $p = 0.027$ ). A majority of men also recognize that equal leave durations would enhance gender equality in the workplace by ensuring that men and women are treated the same by employers (63%). But, despite this general support for equality, many fathers believe leave should be structured differently for each parent. Nearly half (49%) favor equal leave but to be taken at different times, with the mother using it in the early months and the father later. This perspective is more common in Spain (58%) and less so in Portugal (40%). Additionally, 45% of fathers see equal leave as the right goal but believe gradual progress is necessary as fathers and employers are not yet ready for such a shift. Still, a sizable proportion of men (and even more women) support the idea that mothers require more leave than fathers due to biological and caregiving roles such as breastfeeding (56% vs. 63%;  $p = 0.006$ ). Meanwhile, 28% of fathers believe that current leave policies are sufficient as they are, with this view being particularly common in Spain (38%) and Italy (26%), despite the significant difference in leave policies between the two countries. See Figure 29.

**Figure 29.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall and per country who agree or strongly agree that length of parental leave in their country is too short.



### Impact of Parental Leave

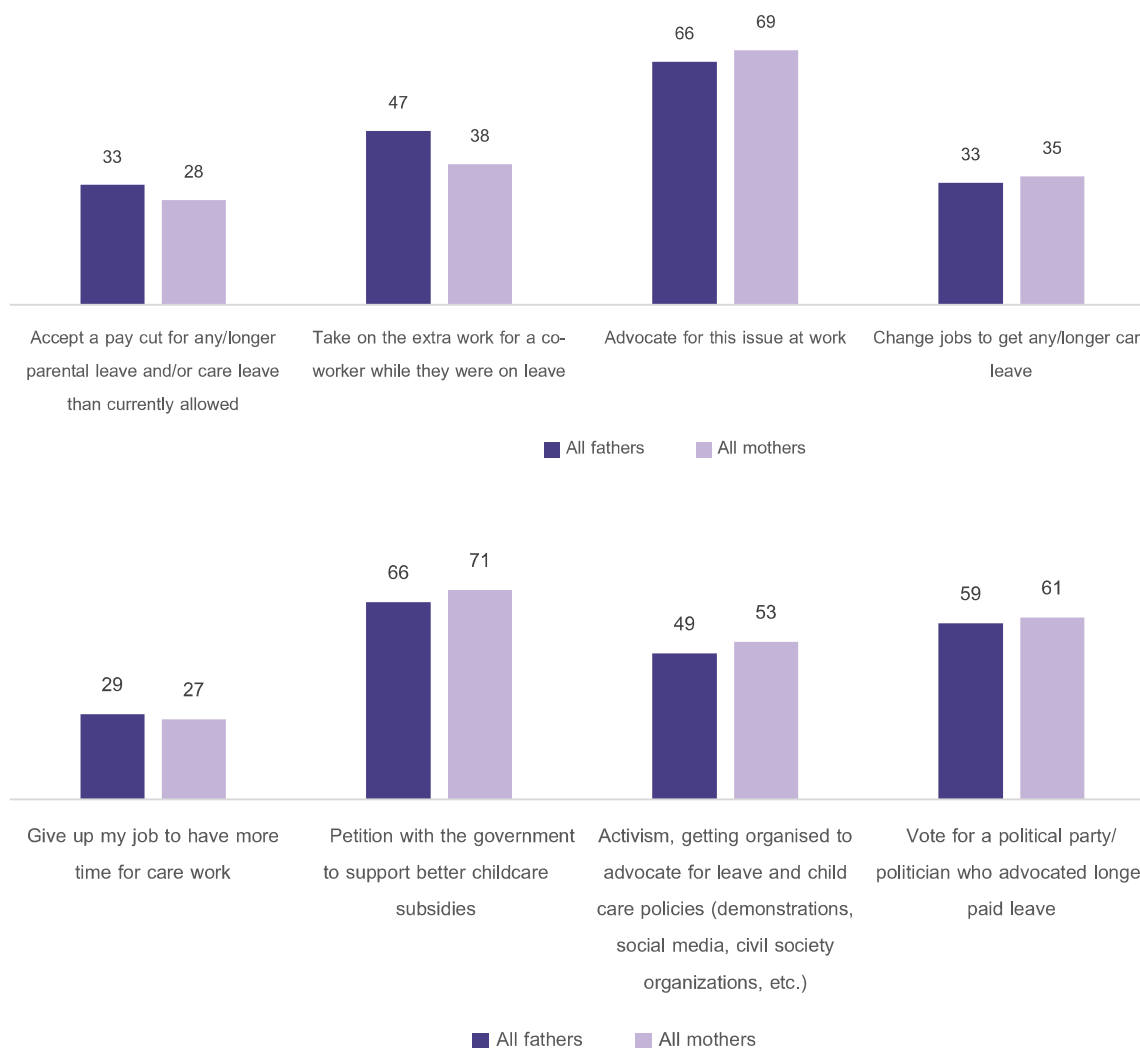
**Fathers overwhelmingly recognize the benefits of taking paid parental leave for themselves, their partners, and their children.** Among employed fathers, 88% reported that taking any or longer paid parental leave would be beneficial or very beneficial to them personally; a sentiment shared by a similar proportion of mothers. Parental leave was also widely seen as beneficial for children, with 93% of fathers and 92% of mothers reporting positive impacts. The perception of benefits for partners was similarly strong among fathers (90%), though significantly lower among mothers (84%,  $p = 0.013$ ). This gender gap was particularly pronounced in Spain (90% of fathers vs. 78% of mothers,  $p = 0.001$ ), begging further investigation. When asked about the impact of their partner's leave-taking, fathers expressed even stronger agreement on its benefits. While 52% of fathers believed that their partner's parental leave was beneficial for their children, 61% of mothers shared this sentiment ( $p = 0.002$ ). This pattern was particularly striking in Italy, where 68% of mothers (vs. 55% of fathers) saw their partner's leave as beneficial for their children ( $p = 0.003$ ).

### Leave Advocacy Intentions

**When asked about their willingness to take action to secure longer parental or care leave, fathers indicated a range of strategies, with advocacy at work and political engagement emerging as key priorities for fathers.** Nearly half (47%) stated they would be willing to take on additional work to cover for a co-worker on leave. Over a third (33%) of fathers stated they would be willing to change jobs to secure more or longer care leave, and 29% would even consider

leaving their jobs altogether to have more time for caregiving. However, willingness to make financial sacrifices was more limited—only 33% of fathers stated they would accept a pay cut for longer paid leave, with the lowest levels reported in Portugal (24%). Two-thirds (66%) stated they would actively advocate for longer paid leave at their workplace, and 66% also reported they would sign a petition urging the government to support better childcare subsidies. Half (49%) stated they would get involved in demonstrations, social media advocacy, or civil society efforts to push for better parental leave and childcare policies. The highest levels of support for government action were recorded in Spain (76%) and Portugal (68%). Nearly 60% of fathers stated they would vote for a party or politician who supported longer paid parental leave.

**Figure 30.** Percent of fathers and mothers overall who agree or strongly agree that they would take different actions to advocate for strengthening parental leave provisions in their country or their employment.



*The findings presented in this section highlight two critical areas in caregiving support structures across Southern Europe. Firstly, care support services, including early childhood education and health services, are key but often insufficient to meet parents' needs. Economic barriers, limited availability, and accessibility challenges undermine the perceived adequacy of these services, particularly for mothers who bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities. Expanding affordable, high-quality childcare and enhancing access to early childhood services will be essential in bridging these gaps. Secondly, parental leave and workplace flexibility remain significant challenges. Workplace constraints, coupled with cultural expectations, hinder equitable access to paid parental leave and flexible work*

*arrangements. Promoting inclusive workplace cultures that value caregiving and ensuring fair parental leave policies are vital steps towards achieving gender-equal parenting across Southern Europe.*



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The *State of Southern European Fathers* report paints an encouraging picture: fathers across the region are approaching parity with women in overall involvement—though significant gender gaps remain. Most men report some measure of active participation in childcare and housework, and many express a strong sense of fulfillment from their caregiving roles. Fathers from the three Southern European countries are increasingly seeing themselves not just as helpers, but as co-responsible caregivers. Yet, this progress comes with a caveat: perceptions of caregiving may be shifting faster than actual practices. The increased visibility of gender-equitable caregiving in public discourse—through policy debates, advocacy, and changing cultural expectations—may be shaping men’s self-reported involvement more than their lived behaviors reflect. The persistent gaps between men’s and women’s involvement in higher intensity care and total hours of routine care, as well as their divergent perceptions of caregiving distribution suggest that, while fathers may genuinely believe they are stepping up equally, mothers’ realities continue to tell a different story.

Additionally, the findings reaffirm that policy and culture matter: where paid leave policies for fathers are stronger and where cultural expectations around caregiving are more progressive, men’s participation in care is significantly higher. However, persistent structural barriers—from time scarcity to inadequate care infrastructure (limited early education services, scarce affordable childcare, and gaps in family-friendly workplace policies)—continue to hold fathers back from deeper engagement, ultimately reinforcing gendered divisions of unpaid labor. The evidence makes clear that when policies and norms support men as caregivers, the payoff is seen in healthier child development, greater gender equality, economic growth through women’s full labor participation, and stronger families and communities. These findings underscore that efforts to promote men’s caregiving – from expanding paternity leave to improving child care access and challenging stereotypes – are a vital component of social and economic progress.

### A Roadmap for Action

To achieve sustained change, a comprehensive evidence-based approach rooted in theory is needed. The *Social-Ecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) points us to the need for multi-level interventions beyond attitude changes, as behavior is also shaped by structural, institutional, and cultural factors. Furthermore, concepts within *Behavioral Change Theory* emphasize that attitudes alone are rarely enough to drive sustained action. The *intention-behavior gap* demonstrates that while many fathers may very well aspire to be more engaged caregivers, systemic barriers like inflexible workplaces and inadequate parental leave can fully prevent them from acting on these intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Meanwhile, *nudge theory* suggests that small environmental shifts, such as making paternity leave the default option, can increase uptake and normalize caregiving behaviors (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Achieving true gender-equitable caregiving requires more than goodwill—it demands structural transformation. The following ‘*Roadmap for Action*’ borrows from these and other approaches to provide concrete, theory-guided and evidence-based steps at multiple levels, to create an enabling environment where fathers can fully participate in caregiving, helping to break the cycle of gendered divisions of unpaid labor.

## 1. Policy Reforms: Strengthening Structural Supports

Systemic change begins with robust policy frameworks that ensure caregiving is equally valued and supported for both parents. Expanding legal entitlements and investing in care infrastructure is crucial to enable fathers to participate in caregiving without economic or professional penalties. Key actions include:

**Recommendation 1:** Expand and equalize paid parental leave for fathers. Spain's model of 16 weeks of fully paid non-transferable leave should serve as a regional benchmark for Italy and Portugal. Policies must ensure that paid leave is 100% remunerated and mandatory; and that fathers take leave without transferring it to mothers, reinforcing the principle of equal responsibility in caregiving. Making men's and women's leave equally costly to society will contribute to narrowing gender gaps and cement institutional and cultural change around leave-taking.

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure financial security during leave. Governments should implement wage-replacement schemes to make extended leave financially viable, particularly for low-income households, where fathers are less likely to take parental leave due to economic constraints.

**Recommendation 3:** Invest in affordable, high-quality childcare and eldercare. Expanding publicly subsidized care services (daycare centers, after-school programs, elder support) can alleviate caregiving burdens, particularly for mothers, and encourage fathers' involvement in non-traditional caregiving roles.

**Recommendation 4:** Enforce the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Countries must align national policies with European Commission standards, ensuring all fathers have access to meaningful parental leave, flexible work options, and protection against workplace discrimination for taking leave.

**Recommendation 5:** Track and evaluate gender disparities in policy implementation. Establish annual progress reports to assess leave uptake, caregiving hours, and workplace policy effectiveness, ensuring accountability in achieving gender-equitable caregiving.

## 2. Workplace Transformation: Making Caregiving Compatible with Work

Workplaces are critical spaces where gendered caregiving norms are reinforced or challenged. Ensuring that fathers can actively participate in care without career penalties or stigma is essential to shifting workplace culture. Key actions include:

**Recommendation 6:** Expand flexible work policies. Employers should offer widespread remote work options, reduced hours, and adjustable schedules, particularly for fathers of young children, to normalize caregiving responsibilities in the workplace.

**Recommendation 7:** Address workplace stigma around caregiving. Implement employer-led awareness campaigns to challenge the perception that caregiving is a "women's role." Management training programs should ensure that fathers who take parental leave or request flexibility are supported, not penalized.

**Recommendation 8:** Ensure job protection for caregiving leave. Strengthen anti-discrimination laws and penalties against employers who penalize fathers for taking parental leave or using flexible work arrangements.

**Recommendation 9:** Incentivize businesses to support caregiving. Offer tax benefits or government subsidies to companies that implement progressive work-family balance policies, such as extended paternity leave, subsidized childcare, or on-site daycare.

**Recommendation 10:** Encourage father-friendly workplaces. Recognize leading companies that actively promote caregiving-friendly policies through certifications or awards, similar to gender-equality rankings.

### 3. Cultural Change: Shifting Norms Around Fatherhood

Social and cultural expectations around caregiving must evolve to fully integrate men as equal caregivers. Changing narratives around masculinity and fatherhood will create lasting shifts in behaviors and perceptions. Key actions include:

**Recommendation 11:** Launch public campaigns celebrating father involvement. National and EU-wide media campaigns should feature real-life father role models, challenging traditional masculinity norms and showcasing caregiving as a strength, not a weakness. Campaigns should emphasize that engaged fatherhood benefits children, partners, and men themselves.

**Recommendation 12:** Normalize fatherhood education. Expand father-specific parenting programs, including prenatal classes for expectant fathers, father-child bonding initiatives, and peer mentoring groups. Programs should destigmatize male caregiving and provide practical caregiving skills training.

**Recommendation 13:** Train professionals to actively engage fathers, challenge gender stereotypes, and create welcoming spaces for all caregivers. By integrating father-inclusive practices into daily routines, communication strategies, and family engagement activities, early childhood services can play a transformative role in normalizing men's caregiving and shifting societal expectations from the earliest years.

**Recommendation 14:** Elevate male caregiving role models. Encourage media, business, and government institutions to highlight caregiving fathers as visible figures in leadership, politics, and pop culture. Fathers who take longer parental leave, engage in childcare, or advocate for caregiving policies should be publicly recognized.

**Recommendation 15:** Raise awareness of fathers' legal entitlements. Governments should launch nationwide public campaigns to inform fathers about their parental leave rights, workplace protections, and caregiving-related benefits. Many fathers remain unaware of their legal entitlements, which contributes to low uptake of paternity leave and reinforces gendered caregiving norms. Campaigns should target both fathers and employers, emphasizing the importance of equal leave uptake and dispelling misconceptions about the economic and professional impacts of taking leave.

**Recommendation 16:** Integrate caregiving into school curriculums. Teaching boys and girls about equal caregiving responsibilities from a young age can help break the cycle of gendered expectations and normalize caregiving as a shared responsibility.

**Recommendation 17:** Challenge stereotypes through storytelling. Support books, TV shows, and films that portray fathers as competent, nurturing caregivers, moving away from outdated narratives that reinforce men as secondary parents.

#### 4. Community Engagement: Strengthening Local and Peer Support Networks

Fathers need peer support, community backing, and social validation to deepen their engagement in caregiving. Strengthening local caregiving networks will help create a collective shift toward more equitable caregiving. Key actions include:

**Recommendation 18:** Create fatherhood networks and peer groups. Community-based initiatives can bring fathers together to share experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating caregiving responsibilities. Online platforms and in-person meetups can provide fathers with guidance and emotional support.

**Recommendation 19:** Develop care cooperatives. Encourage collective caregiving models where parents (especially fathers) share childcare or eldercare responsibilities, reducing the burden on individual families and creating stronger caregiving communities.

**Recommendation 20:** Strengthen partnerships with civil society. Governments should collaborate with NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups to push for policy change, promote awareness campaigns, and expand caregiving support services at the grassroots level.

**Recommendation 21:** Create men's engagement hubs in public spaces. Libraries, schools, and community centers should host father-child activities, workshops, and parenting classes to normalize caregiving engagement among men.

**Recommendation 22:** Encourage intergenerational caregiving initiatives. Programs that connect fathers with elderly caregivers (such as grandfathers) can bridge generational gaps and challenge outdated gender norms around caregiving responsibilities.

The findings of this report suggest that Southern European fathers are at a crossroads. Many are stepping up to caregiving in unprecedented ways, yet deep-rooted barriers remain, particularly in Italy, where traditional norms still constrain caregiving realities. Spain and Portugal offer glimpses of a more equitable future, demonstrating that when policies, workplace cultures, and social norms align, fathers will take on more caregiving responsibilities. Expanding parental leave, promoting workplace flexibility, investing in care infrastructure, and shifting cultural narratives are all essential to ensuring that caregiving is no longer seen as a women's responsibility but a shared duty and privilege.

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