

# Fathers in Context: Comparative Analysis of Father Involvement in Bulgaria and the Netherlands

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## Summary

This report compares father involvement with their children in Bulgaria and the Netherlands by examining country differences in family formation patterns, policy context, and cultural prescriptions regarding family life. In studying the time fathers spend with their children, it is important to distinguish between time-structuring and time-flexible tasks because these tasks tend to be divided along gendered lines. Time-structuring tasks are those tasks that take a longer time to complete or have to be performed at a certain time of the day, such as bathing or feeding the child, and often fall to mothers to perform. Time-flexible tasks, on the other hand, are commonly performed by fathers. These are the tasks that can be performed at any time of the day and include reading to and playing with the child.

Major conclusions are as follows:

- With regard to **family formation patterns**, the two-child family model is persistent in both Bulgaria and the Netherlands, despite the Netherlands being farther along the individualisation process than Bulgaria.
- The **policy context** in Bulgaria can be characterised by continuity with the country's socialist past. Maternity, paternity, and parental leave remain long by international

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standards, and both mothers and fathers are expected to participate full-time in the labour market. Policy recommendations include:

- Fathers in Bulgaria may benefit from more *flexible work arrangements* that allow them to combine work and childcare,
- whilst mothers may benefit from *shorter maternity leave* which helps prevent discrimination on the labour market.
- *High quality childcare* services for all children would benefit both mothers and fathers
- as would policy supporting *grandparental care*.

The Netherlands is characterised by a mix of formal and informal childcare, but policies are mainly aimed at mothers. Policy changes in the Netherlands should focus on fathers:

- Fathers could benefit from *longer, well-paid leave provisions*.
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- The **cultural prescriptions**, or values and norms, regarding men's and women's roles in parenting as well as gender equality are more traditional in Bulgaria than in the Netherlands. Yet despite traditional gender roles in Bulgaria, a majority of fathers report wanting to be involved with their kids. Engagement in work is the most cited reason for fathers not being more involved.
  - Despite less traditional gender norms in the Netherlands, **father involvement** is not greater in the Netherlands than Bulgaria. In fact, when compared with Dutch fathers, Bulgarian fathers are equally or even more involved in time-flexible tasks. However, Dutch fathers share childcare more equally with mothers than Bulgarian fathers do.
  - **Cultural prescriptions do appear to influence father involvement** in both Bulgaria and the Netherlands. However, in Bulgaria they only influence father involvement in time-structuring tasks such as feeding the child. Bulgarian fathers' time-flexible involvement with their children appears to be universal and constant. By contrast, cultural prescriptions influence father involvement in both time-structuring and time-flexible tasks for the more individualistic, Dutch fathers.

## **I. Introduction**

Families across Europe differ. John Hajnal (1965) is amongst the first scholars to document these differences on the strength of his remarkable discovery of a unique pattern of late marriage in north-western Europe. For decades, his pivotal work on the St. Petersburg (Russia) – Trieste (Italy) diving line has served as a basis for research on cross-regional and cross-country differences in family life; a research line that has ultimately concluded that countries in the south and east of Europe are more family dependent (familialistic) than countries in the north and west of Europe (Glaser, Tomassini and Grundy 2004; Reher 1998; Viazzo 2010). In these studies, familism is signified by early formation patterns, traditional division of household labour and childcare, intensive intergenerational support exchange, and strong family obligations. A strand of comparative sociological research has also linked the family and the state, arguing that in some European nations, welfare state support and policy arrangements are more supportive of families than in other countries (Saraceno & Keck, 2010).

One criticism of cross-national comparisons is that the discourse about families tends to be focused on mothers, at the expense of fathers. Particularly when considering policy, the debate is often about how best to accommodate mothers' dual roles as workers and caregivers (O'Brien, 2013). Yet fathers are increasingly getting involved in family life (Hook & Wolfe, 2012), frequently without sufficient support from employers and policymakers. In order to give fathers the support they need to fulfil their roles to the best of their ability, policymakers need to be aware of the factors that drive fathers to be involved with their children. In this work, we first briefly provide background on country differences in familism in terms of family formation patterns and welfare regimes, and then move on to describe differences in cultural prescriptions and the division of childcare. More specifically, we aim to examine the degree to which Bulgaria and the Netherlands differ when it comes to the time that fathers spend with their children - father involvement - and how involvement might be driven by values and norms regarding family life.

Bulgaria and the Netherlands are interesting cases to compare because they are not only characterised by typical cultural traits from the south-eastern and north-western European regions respectively, but they also typify employment arrangements for women within these regions. Bulgaria has historically high levels of full-time employment for women and a very small (around

2.5%) proportion of women working part-time<sup>2</sup>. The Netherlands, on the other hand, is known to have the highest level of part-time employment amongst women in Europe; about 77% of all women (and 8.5% of all men) in the Netherlands work less than 32 hours a week (European Commission, 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

In this report, we analyse data on father involvement and cultural prescriptions from two nationally representative databases, namely the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria (<http://mencare.bg/sociologichesko-prouchvane-naglasibashtinstvo/>) and the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (<http://www.nkps.nl/>). The samples used in the analyses consist of 501 and 434 cases for each dataset respectively and cover children living at home with their father. Additionally, we employ the Generations and Gender Survey (<http://www.ggp-i.org/>) - an international survey conducted in a number of Eastern and Western European countries - in order to examine attitudes towards family formation and grandparenting. Sample sizes for Bulgaria and the Netherlands are 9344 and 6091 cases respectively.

## **II. Background**

### **2.1. Family formation patterns**

Bulgaria, compared with the Netherlands, is characterised by rather traditional conjugal behaviour (Genov & Krasteva, 2001; Robila, 2004). Marriage and children remain of paramount cultural importance in Bulgaria (Genov & Krasteva, 2001; Robila & Krishnakumar, 2004) despite increasing levels of cohabitation (Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2014) and children born out of wedlock (Koytcheva & Philipov, 2008). According to the Generations and Gender Survey, only 21% of the Bulgarian population (strongly) agree that marriage is an outdated institution and about 67% and 63% respectively believe that women and men should have children in order to be fulfilled.

The Netherlands, on the other hand, is known to be a more individualistic country than Bulgaria, and, for that matter, than all Central and Eastern European countries (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Van de Kaa, 1994). Analyses from the Generations and Gender Survey suggest that about 90% of all Dutch people think that it is acceptable for unmarried couples to live together (compared with 64% of the

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<sup>2</sup> Amongst the male population, around 2% work part-time.

Bulgarian population) and only 19% of the Dutch population believe that life is incomplete without children.

**Table 1: Selected demographic indicators in Bulgaria and the Netherlands**

	<b>Bulgaria (2015)</b>	<b>The Netherlands (2013/14)</b>
<b>Marriage rate</b>	3.9‰	3.8‰ <sup>*i</sup>
<b>Cohabitation rate, 20+ years old</b>	4.2% <sup>#</sup>	9.3% <sup>#</sup>
<b>Divorce rate</b>	1.5‰	5.4‰ <sup>*</sup>
<b>Age of marriage (women)</b>	27.8	33.8 <sup>*</sup>
<b>Age of first birth (women)</b>	26.9	29.5
<b>Total fertility rate</b>	1.53 children per woman	1.68 children per woman
<b>Extra-marital fertility</b>	59.1%	53% <sup>+</sup>

Sources: NSI, 2016; CBS, 2016; <sup>#</sup>OECD Family Database; <sup>+</sup>Latten & Mulder (2012)

Notes: <sup>\*</sup> data available for 2013; <sup>i</sup> marriage rate excludes registered partnership (=0.6‰)

As can be seen in table 1, the demographic indicators' values in both countries also differ. In the years 2013 to 2015, the most significant differences were documented in the case of divorce rates, cohabitation levels, and age of marriage and first birth. Briefly, these statistics suggest that compared with Bulgaria, children in the Netherlands are more likely to be born in cohabitation and have older and divorced parents. Yet, despite these differences, in both countries the two-child family model seems to be predominant.

## **2.2. Policy context and childcare alternatives**

Bulgaria and the Netherlands not only differ in their demographic but also in their policy make-up. According to Saraceno and Keck (2010), when it comes to responsibilities towards children, Bulgaria falls into a cluster described as 'supported familialism' whereas the Netherlands belongs to a 'familialism by default' cluster. Differentiating the degree to which country-specific institutional frameworks impose reliance on family members and/or support individual autonomy, Saraceno and Keck (2010) argue that 'familialism by default' pertains to countries where there are few or no publicly provided alternatives to family care and financial support. 'Supported familialism', on the other hand, pertains to countries where there are policies, usually in the form

of financial transfers, which support families in keeping up their financial and caring responsibilities<sup>3</sup>.

Supportive family policies in Bulgaria are an inheritance from their communist past. As mentioned, Bulgaria has witnessed one of the highest female employment rates in Europe since the 1950s (Genov & Krasteva, 2001). In order to ensure high employment rates amongst both men and women, the socialist state assumed part of the care and bringing up of children by constructing a wide-range of nurseries, kindergartens and inexpensive services for child meals, as well as by creating social policies aimed at promoting gender equality. Such policies included prolonged periods of maternity leave, relatively easy access to abortion, and free health care and education for mothers and children (Dimova, 2009; Genov & Krasteva, 2001). During the summer school holidays, which last three full months in Bulgaria, summer camps and other activities for children were also organised (Staykova, 2004).

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, faced with conditions of economic and political turmoil, unemployment increased while the socialist family policies were gradually reduced. Yet, despite reductions in family policies, working arrangements in post-socialist Bulgaria have been accompanied by traditionally long maternity leave arrangements, a recently introduced paternity leave and parental leave for both mothers and fathers (Schulze & Gergoric, 2013). Table 2 depicts the duration and compensation rates of maternity, paternity and parental leave in Bulgaria and the Netherlands.

**Table 2: Maternity, paternity and parental leave indicators in Bulgaria and the Netherlands**

	Bulgaria		The Netherlands	
	Duration	Compensation	Duration	Compensation
<b>Maternity leave</b>	410 days	90%	112 days*	100%
<b>Paternity leave</b>	15 days	90%	2 days	100%
			3 days <sup>+</sup>	0%
<b>Parental leave</b>	320 days	340 BG levs**	Varies	0%

Sources: den Dulk, 2015; Schulze & Gergoric, 2013; Bulgarian Law Portal (<http://www.lex.bg/laws/>).

Notes: \*Official regulations are presented in weeks (112 days equals to 16 weeks); \*\*340 Bulgarian levs equals to 170 euros.

<sup>+</sup>Fathers are allowed 5 days in total: 2 paid and 3 unpaid.

<sup>3</sup> The model includes also a third cluster, namely a cluster of countries, which are ‘defamilialised’. This cluster includes the Nordic countries where needs are partly addressed through public provision (services, income replacement).

The **maternity leave** in Bulgaria is the longest in the European Union with duration of 410 days and an allowance of 90 percent of mothers' gross salary. The maternity leave is usually divided into 45 days before the birth and 365 days afterwards. Maternity leave in the Netherlands is considerably less generous: Mothers in the Netherlands are only allowed 16 fully paid weeks off around the birth of a child, usually divided into 4 weeks before birth and 12 weeks afterwards. Although there are no official statistics kept on how many mothers in the Netherlands use maternity leave, the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (Den Dulk, 2015) estimates that nearly all women do so.

The **paternity leave** in Bulgaria was introduced in 2009 and allows fathers to take up to 15 paid days off immediately after the birth of the child. Up to date, there are no official statistics regarding the proportion of fathers who take paternity leave in Bulgaria. If we consult the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria, however, it seems that only 27%<sup>4</sup> percent of the Bulgarian fathers took paternity leave in 2014. Main reasons for not making use of the leave are the belief that it is not needed as the mother (30.6%) or another relative (22.4%) was there to take care of the child. About 5% could not afford it financially and about 2% shared that they were not aware of the leave. In the Netherlands, men are eligible for 2 days of fully paid paternity leave and 3 days of unpaid leave following the birth of a child. Approximately 51% of men take paternity leave, but almost all men do take vacation days or use other forms of leave to be present at the birth of their child (Den Dulk, 2015). As of July 1, 2017 (Tweede Kamer Der Staten-Generaal, 2015), all 5 days of paternity leave will be paid.

The **parental leave** in Bulgaria is the period following maternity leave and can be taken by mothers until the child reaches the age of 2, given that the child is not admitted to public childcare services. The amount of allowance paid during this leave is 340 Bulgarian levs<sup>5</sup>. After that, each parent is eligible for up to 6 months unpaid parental leave until the child reaches the age of 8. The parental leave in Bulgaria can be transferred to the father or to one of the grandparents, who work under an employment contract and have social insurance. However, according to the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria, only around 1% of the fathers

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<sup>4</sup> This statistic pertains to fathers with children under the age of 5 in order to account for the fact that paternity leave was introduced in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Should the parents not use the leave, they are entitled to a financial compensation of 170 Bulgarian levs.

have taken the mother’s leave for more than 6 months. Generally, parental leave seems to not be widely used in Bulgaria: in 2010 less than 5 percent of all eligible women<sup>6</sup> have taken at least one month of parental leave (European Commission, 2014).

In the Netherlands, women and men are both eligible for parental leave, which varies in length depending on how many hours are usually worked per week. Dutch mothers and fathers are allowed up to 26 times their usual working week, to be taken at any time and in any way before the child’s eighth birthday. Women and men who take this leave generally prefer to combine it with work rather than to take it all at once. Women take on average 10 hours off per week (1.25 days/week) and men 8 hours (1 day), though only 57% of eligible mothers and 23% of eligible fathers make use of this form of leave (Den Dulk, 2015).

**Table 3: Public childcare usage in Bulgaria and the Netherlands, in percentages**

	<b>EU average</b>	<b>Bulgaria</b>	<b>The Netherlands</b>
<b>&lt;30hours per week</b>			
<b>Children 0-3 years old</b>	15	0	46
<b>Children 3+</b>	37	2	76
<b>&gt;=30hours per week</b>			
<b>Children 0-3 years old</b>	15	7	6
<b>Children 3+</b>	47	58	13

Sources: European Commission (2013a, 2013b)

The leaves available to parents are often times paired with the availability and usage of **childcare services**. As can be seen in table 3, children in Bulgaria are generally less likely to be in public childcare compared with Dutch children, with the exception of children aged 3 or more who attend childcare services for more than 30 hours a week. A notable difference is also that public childcare usage below 30 hours a week is extremely low or basically non-existent in Bulgaria whereas in the Netherlands these percentages are rather high: 46 and 76 percent for children in the age groups 0-3 years old and 3+ years old respectively.

When it comes to alternative childcare services, another notable difference between childcare in Bulgaria and in many Western European countries is that **grandparents** as a rule are less involved

<sup>6</sup> Similarly to paternity leave, official statistics on men taking parental leave are not available.



in Western Europe. As mentioned earlier, the importance of grandparents is recognised legally in Bulgaria as well, where grandparents are eligible to take parental leave, yet there is no such allowance for grandparents in the Netherlands. Not only is grandparental support not common in the Netherlands, it is not commonly believed that grandparents *should* be heavily involved. According to the Generations and Gender Survey only about 19% of the Dutch population believe that grandparents should be prepared to look after grandchildren if parents are unable to do so (compared with 71% in Bulgaria).

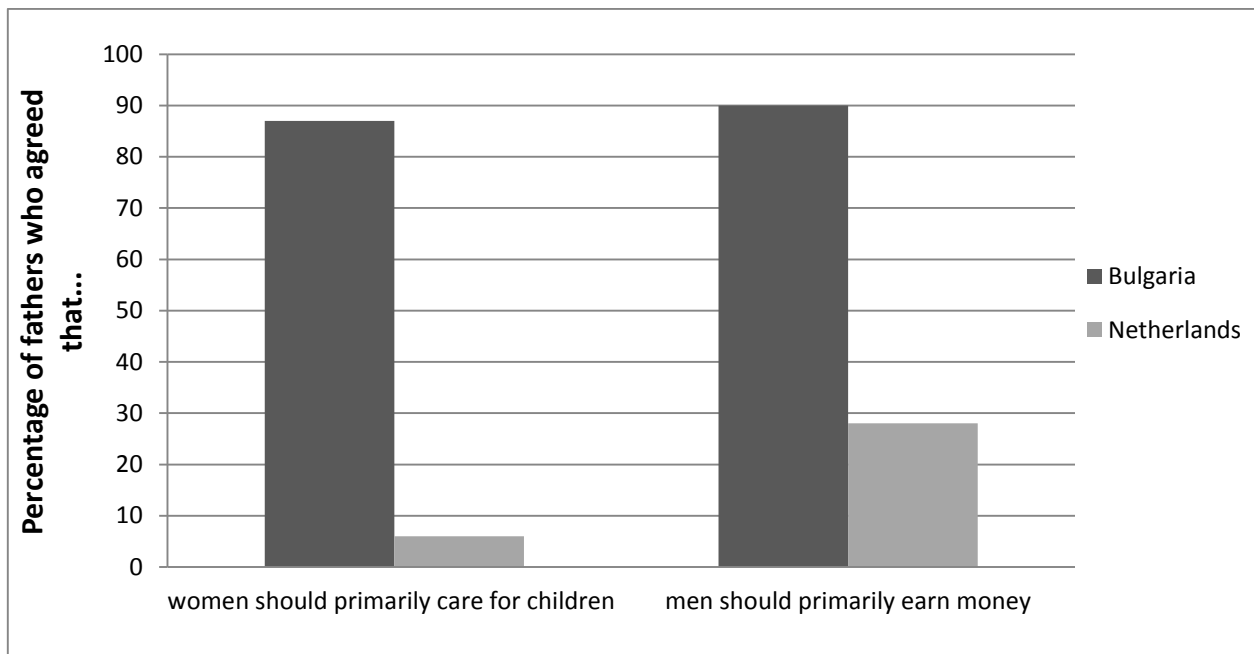
### **2.3. Cultural prescriptions**

In addition to employment arrangements, policy contexts, and alternative childcare arrangements, cultural beliefs and preferences (cultural prescriptions) may influence father involvement. At present, there are only a handful of studies that examined the link between cultural prescriptions and father involvement, but the existing research reveals that *on average*, men's positive attitudes towards parenting (Gaunt, 2006; McGill, 2014; Perry & Langley, 2013) and egalitarian gender role attitudes (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010; Keizer, 2015) are linked to higher levels of involvement.

In Bulgaria, cultural prescriptions have been strongly influenced by socialist dogma. The country had a deep-rooted ideological commitment to gender equality and considered social and economic activity as a necessary basis for women's equal status with men (Ådnanes, 2001). In other words, during the socialist period Bulgarian women and men were believed to have the same opportunities in education, labour and politics. In practice, however, women were not only expected to be 'good workers' but also 'good mothers' and hence they were faced with the so-called double-burden (Ådnanes, 2001; Lobodzinska, 1996). Men, on the other hand, were freed from domestic work and, as Dimova (2009) argues, none of the active roles that were attached to the Bulgarian socialist men were related to the family and the home. At that time, men, in addition to being formally seen as the head of the family, were portrayed as being a member of the Party and sometimes as a career-seeker. This view of Bulgarian men and women was reinforced in the 1970s and 1980s, when traditional gender roles were once again revitalised as a response to the onset of a long lasting fertility decline and the loss of the Bulgarian Party's legitimacy (Lobodzinska, 1996). The new message carried to society suggested that women should return to their true nature and make the household their priority (Ådnanes, 2001).

Following decades of socialist propaganda, in contemporary Bulgaria, women’s large share in domestic unpaid work has been widely accepted. We find evidence for this development in the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria. When asked about the most important role of men and women, 90% of fathers indicated that the role of men is to earn money and to provide for the family, and 87% said that women’s role is to take care of the household and the children.

**Figure 1: Gender norms<sup>7</sup> in Bulgaria and the Netherlands**



Sources: The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study and the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria

In the Netherlands, on the other hand, fathers perceive the ideal division of family tasks as rather equal. According to the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, 94% of the Dutch fathers think that both women and men are responsible for taking care of the children (compared to 6% believing that childcare is solely women’s responsibility) and 72% of Dutch fathers think that both women and

<sup>7</sup> The exact questions used to prepare the figure are as follows: In Bulgaria, respondents were asked to indicate whether they (strongly) agree or strongly (disagree) with the statements “The most important role of women is to care for home and children” and “The most important role of men is to earn money and provide financially for the family”. In the Netherlands, respondents were asked to indicate “who should look after children” and “who should earn money”. The answer categories included solely or primarily the mother, solely or primarily the father, both equally.

men are responsible for earning money (compared with 28% believing that earning money is solely men's responsibility).

In a similar vein, we find that in the Netherlands only about 27% of the fathers agree that the mother should stop working after the child's birth and about 4% believe that working mothers are selfish. In Bulgaria, by comparison, 58% of the fathers (strongly) disagreed with the statement that when a child is born the parent who has lower wage and fewer career prospects should stop working, even if this is the father. In sum, it seems that Bulgarian fathers exhibit and subscribe to rather traditional gender norms whereas Dutch fathers are more egalitarian when it comes to the division of childcare and the family's economic welfare.

With regard to values and norms of father involvement more specifically, we observe a rather different picture. Norms of father involvement refer to whether fathers think men in general should be involved with their kids, whilst values of father involvement refer specifically to how men prioritise caring for children in their own lives (van Groenou & de Boer, 2016). In Bulgaria<sup>8</sup>, about 60% of the fathers indicated that taking care of children is more important than work and career, and about 90% agreed that Bulgarian fathers should be more involved with their children. The most common perceived barrier to active father involvement is the father's busy work schedule.

### **III. Father involvement**

Research consistently shows that father involvement has positive benefits for children's social, emotional, and intellectual development (for a meta-analysis, see McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). Yet, despite the benefits of father involvement and its widespread acceptance, one of the great paradoxes of fatherhood research is that studies consistently show fathers being less involved in childcare than mothers. Although the hours spent by fathers in childcare have increased in past decades, fathers currently spend only about half the time taking care of kids that mothers do (Hall, 2005; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004).

In what follows, we provide specific information regarding the degree to which fathers in Bulgaria and the Netherlands are involved in childcare. We distinguish between relative (fathers compared

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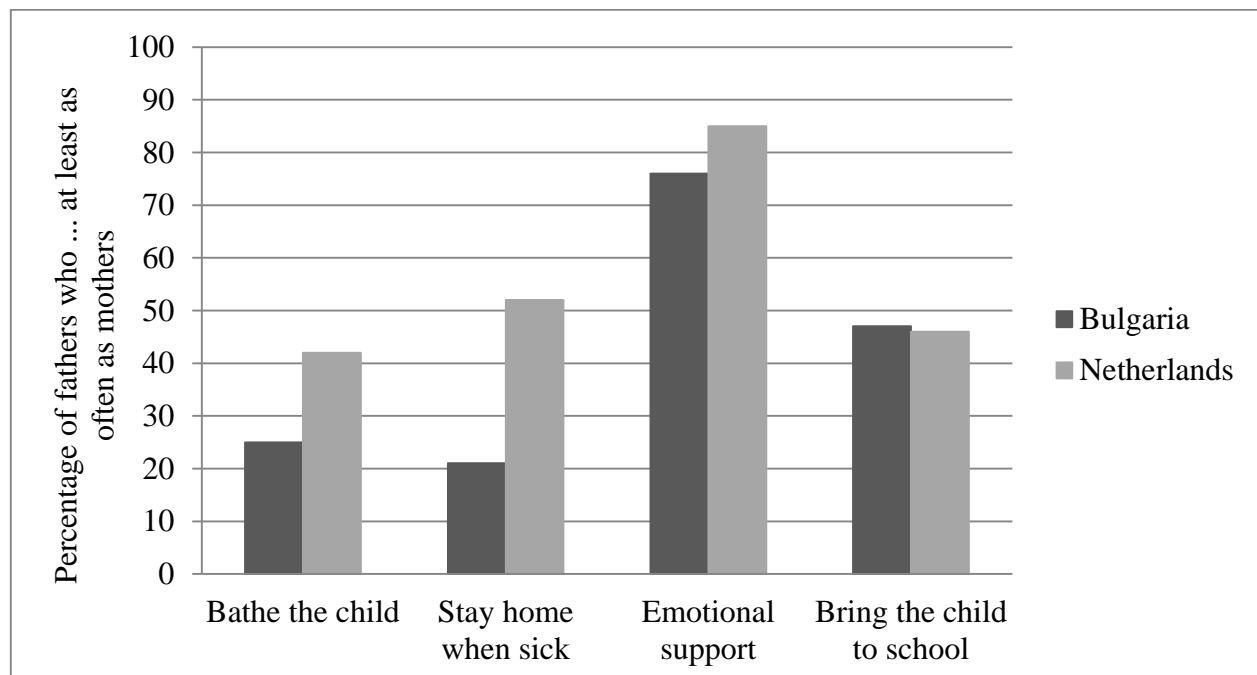
<sup>8</sup> There are no data available on similar measures in the Netherlands.

with mothers) and absolute (frequency of) father involvement in time-structuring and time-flexible activities.

### 1. Relative father involvement

Fathers in Bulgaria are nearly as involved as mothers in some aspects of child raising, and far less involved in others. When it comes to hugging and kissing the child, at least 76% of Bulgarian fathers do this as much as mothers or more. By comparison, only 47% of fathers visit the child’s school as much as mothers do, and 25% and 21% are equally involved in tasks that have to be done during the work day such as bathing and staying home with the child when sick, respectively.

**Figure 2: Relative father involvement in time-structuring and flexible childcare activities in Bulgaria and the Netherlands**



Sources: The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study and the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria

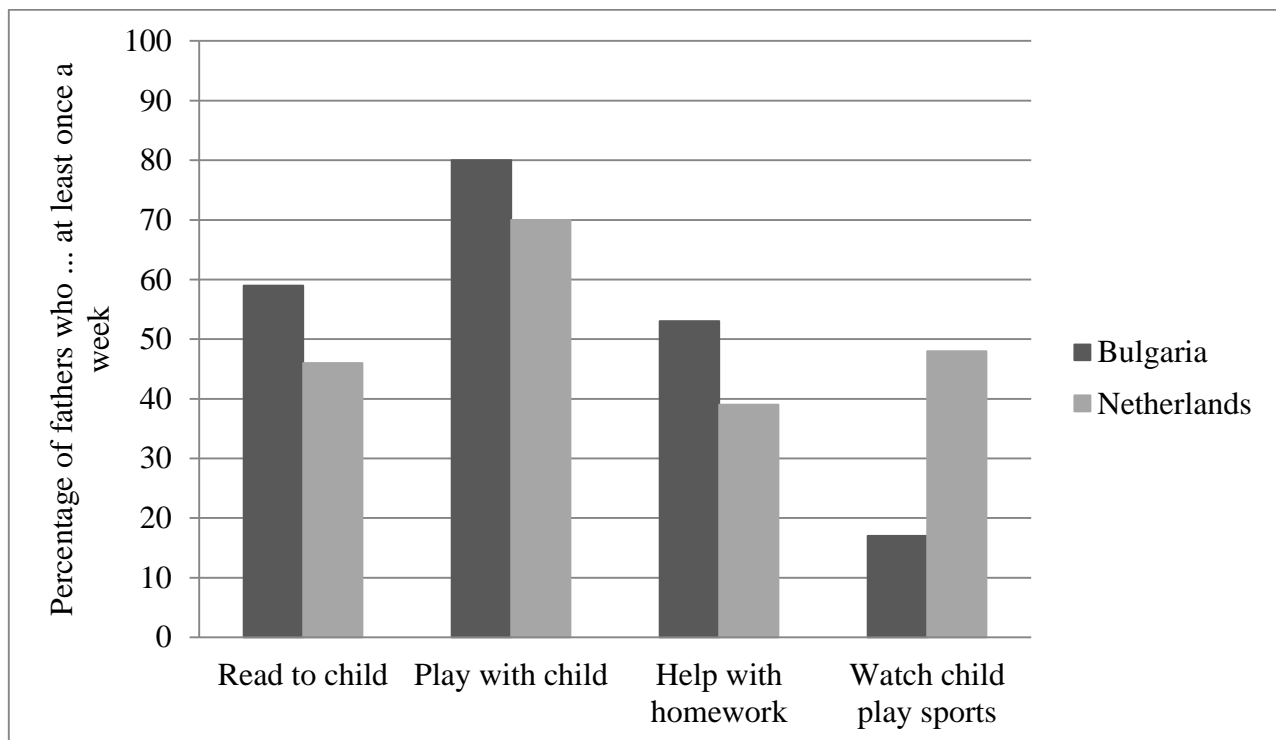
Although Dutch fathers are on average more equally involved than Bulgarian fathers are, we see this same pattern across different childcare activities in the Netherlands. Like Bulgarian fathers, Dutch fathers are nearly equally involved compared to mothers in time-flexible tasks that can be done at any time of day, such as providing emotional support (85%). Yet only 40-50% are equally involved in time-structuring tasks that take a long time to complete or have to be done around

parents' schedules, such as bathing the child and staying home with the child when sick. Generally speaking, time-structuring childcare tasks remain the domain of mothers in both countries.

## 2. Absolute father involvement

Whilst Bulgarian fathers appear to do less childcare when compared with what Bulgarian mothers do, compared with Dutch fathers they are quite involved, particularly in time-flexible tasks<sup>9</sup>. Only 46% of Dutch fathers reported having read to their child in the past week, compared to 59% of Bulgarian fathers<sup>10</sup>. This pattern also exists for playing with children (Dutch fathers: 70%; Bulgarian fathers: 80%) and helping children with homework (Dutch fathers: 39%; Bulgarian fathers: 53%).

**Figure 3: Absolute father involvement in time-flexible childcare activities in Bulgaria and the Netherlands**



Sources: The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study and the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria

<sup>9</sup> Information was not available on Dutch fathers' frequency of involvement in time-structuring tasks.

<sup>10</sup> The wording in the questions varies slightly across questionnaires. In the NKPS respondents are asked: "How often did you do [childcare task] in the past week?" while in the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria, respondents were asked: "How often do you usually do [childcare task]?"

The one exception, however, is that fathers in the Netherlands are much more likely (48%) to have accompanied their child to sports or other activities in the past week than are Bulgarian fathers (17%), perhaps reflecting the greater involvement of Dutch children in formally organized extracurricular activities.

### **3. Link between cultural prescriptions and behaviour**

To what extent do cultural prescriptions explain father involvement in time-flexible and time-structuring childcare tasks in Bulgaria and the Netherlands?

In order to answer this question, we perform several regression analyses using data from the Survey on Attitudes, Practices, and Barriers to Active Father Involvement in Bulgaria and the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study<sup>11</sup>. In these analyses, we control for a number of background characteristics of the father, such as work arrangements, education and the number of children he has, as well as for the child's age.

Our results for Bulgaria show that both norms of father involvement and gender norms appear to be related to men's actual involvement in time-structuring tasks but not time-flexible tasks, perhaps because even very traditional fathers enjoy time-flexible tasks such as playing with children. Unlike in Bulgaria, the gender norms Dutch fathers hold have an impact on involvement in both time-flexible and time-structuring tasks<sup>12</sup>. Fathers who are more gender egalitarian play more with their kids, are more likely to stay home with the child when sick, and more often bathe, dress, and bring children to school. Because norms are related to both time-flexible and time-structuring tasks in the Netherlands but only time-structuring tasks in Bulgaria, it might be that father involvement in the Netherlands is driven to a greater extent by fathers' own norms than it is in Bulgaria, reinforcing the idea that the Dutch are more individualistic than Bulgarians.

## **IV. Conclusions and policy recommendations**

In this work, we have demonstrated that Bulgaria and the Netherlands differ significantly in terms of paternal involvement as well as in the context in and against which father involvement has

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<sup>11</sup> The analyses for the Netherlands were performed by Prof. Renske Keizer and are published in the *International Review of Sociology* (Keizer, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> There is no comparable information on Dutch norms of father involvement.

developed. Compared with Dutch fathers, Bulgarian fathers seem to be more emotional and more frequently involved in time-flexible childcare activities such as reading to and playing with the child. Since this behaviour appears *not* to be influenced by whether the father prioritises family over work and whether the father believes that fathers in general should be more involved in childcare, it is plausible to assume the universality of this behaviour. In other words, even in families with more traditional fathers, hugging and playing with the child occurs frequently and the only barrier to engaging even more in such activities seems to be the Bulgarian fathers' working arrangements. Despite strongly believing that their role is to earn money and provide financially for the family, when asked what prevents them from more active engagement in childcare, the majority of the Bulgarian fathers indicated their busy work schedule. This finding suggests that if fathers were to be even more involved with their children, **fathers should be offered the possibility of more flexible working arrangements.**

The successful implementation of such a policy, however, strongly depends on fathers' *attitude* towards working fewer hours. Our analyses revealed that whilst comparatively long, paid paternity leave is available to Bulgarian fathers, only about 30% have made use of it. The main reason for not taking leave is the father's perception that the mother or another relative, likely the grandmother, are there to care for the child. On the one hand, this seems to reflect what seems to be a deep-rooted belief that women's role is to stay at home and care for children, and on the other hand, it poses a question as to the activities in which fathers think they should be more involved. Although the time fathers spend in time-structuring activities appears to be a venue offering greater room for improvement, 70% of the fathers seem not to believe that they need to stay home and perform these activities even when offered the possibility to do so. Time-structuring activities are not only more time consuming but also more physically demanding and at times they may seem unpleasant to the Bulgarian father. However, it is during these activities that the parents develop not only an emotional but also a physical bond with the child (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007) and **fathers in Bulgaria may need to be reminded of the positive benefits of performing time-structuring activities.**

Unlike the Netherlands, which seems to be characterised by a mix of formal and informal care for children in both age groups 0-3 and 3+, in Bulgaria children under 3 years of age are raised exclusively in a familial setting. Long maternity leave arrangements in Bulgaria have ensured that

mothers are able to rear their children and develop a healthy and loving relationship with offspring. Yet, three years is a long period in which the mother may not only prioritise family and household (even more), but also detach from the labour market. Scholars have argued that despite almost universal full-time female employment in Bulgaria, women have a disadvantage on the labour market in terms of both financial compensation and career opportunities (Hofäcker, Stoilova, & Riebling, 2013; Lobodzinska, 1996). Furthermore, especially in the private sector, pregnant women and mothers with young children are frowned upon (Hofäcker et al., 2013), and many of them are faced with lack of employment security (Dimova, 2009). This situation calls for considerations regarding **shortening the maternity leave in the country and/or strengthening regulations ensuring mothers' security on the labour market**. Prior research differs somewhat, but in general it suggests that approximately six months is the optimal amount of time for maternity leave in order to maximize mother and child's physical needs whilst not damaging mothers' attachment to the labour market (Galtry & Callister, 2005). Much of the success of such policy amendments depends, however, on the extent to which the private sector is willing to prioritise the well-being of their workers over productivity and economic profit. Research on the impact of the duration and compensation of the maternity, as well as paternity, leave on companies' output and the state's budget is needed and essential in determining the optimal leave periods and monetary compensation.

In order to ensure a successful implementation of a shorter maternity leave, it is also important to **arrange not only more but also high quality public childcare arrangements for children of all ages**. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent Bulgarian families are prepared to utilise such facilities. Although decades of socialist arrangements may have led to what Hofäcker et al. (2013) call public 'childcare culture', decades of socialist ideology in combination with long maternity leave seems to have also led to the development and/or strengthening of a wide-spread and deep-rooted belief that it is women's primary responsibility to care for young children. Such deep-rooted beliefs are known to be persistent and difficult to change, and if a society decides to embark on such a road, it is important to not only carefully design evidence-based rules and regulations which will assist the change but also to periodically evaluate the success of those rules and regulations.

**Supporting grandparents in assuming part of the care for young children might be an alternative arrangement** that will ensure an earlier return of the Bulgarian mother to the labour



market. As we have shown, acceptance for grandparental care is more widespread in Bulgaria than it is in the Netherlands and it is likely that the grandmother assumes the role of the ‘other relative’ who steps in to perform some of the childcare tasks which are otherwise performed mainly by the mother. One could argue that such arrangements might not only relieve the mother, but also provide pleasure and fulfilment for the grandmother who herself has been a mother and is likely to prioritise family over work. Yet, if not supported in this endeavour, the grandmothers’ own employment might be jeopardised and leave them in a situation in which the heart is full but the fridge is empty. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss possible ways to assist grandparents, yet we would like to suggest that the issue seems to be multifaceted and complex, and a policy change will likely need to be synchronised with debates on pension reforms and female employment.

Compared with Bulgaria, in the Netherlands not only is the division of childcare between the formal and informal spheres more equal, but so is the division of childcare tasks between mothers and fathers. Despite short and relatively less well-compensated paternity leave, fathers have embarked on the road of assuming a greater share of time-structuring tasks. **Ensuring a longer and better-compensated leave** for Dutch fathers may therefore prove beneficial in further encouraging them to partake in childcare.

Finally, unlike Bulgaria where emotional engagement and involvement in time-flexible tasks seem to be universal, in the Netherlands values and norms appear to predict paternal involvement in time-structuring as well as in time-flexible tasks. This finding could be seen as evidence for cultural differences at the societal level. Compared with Bulgaria, the Netherlands is deemed a more individualistic country where people value autonomy and independence. This is not to say that in individualistic countries people are emotionally detached from their families; it rather means that people find it (equally) important to participate in social activities outside the family domain. Individualism as a cultural dimension (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) is manifested not only in family life, but also in domains of life, such as work and leisure, and attempts for a quick, conscious and systematic change are not necessarily needed and unlikely to be successful. What we mean to stress, however, is that imposing policy arrangements and legal frameworks which originated in more individualistic societies to more collectivistic societies, and vice versa, are likely to be detrimental to people’s well-being and state’s budgets.

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