

# Bridging the gender gap at home?

*Brett Ory writes about childcare division within families based on the Generations and Gender Survey.*

International Women's Day was last month and the take away message this year was much the same as in past years: Women have it better now than ever before, but it's still not enough. While women in Western countries are more involved in the labor market than ever before, thus indicating that they are increasingly economically self-sufficient, women are still disproportionately engaged in housework and childcare. The combination of paid and unpaid work can represent a [double burden](#) for women, one which many researchers and [policy makers](#) believe can be eased by men's greater participation in childcare. According to this perspective, gender equality isn't just about women joining the labor market; it's also about men fully embracing domestic responsibilities. We looked at data on father's participation in childcare for 16 European countries and Australia, and consistently found that moms in all countries do more childcare than dads, even when controlling for the hours that moms work, mother's and father's educational attainment, father's age, number of children, having any pre-school children in the house, and whether the primary respondent was a man or a woman. The data comes from the first wave of the [Generations and Gender Surveys](#). What dads do

Childcare tasks that mothers do, tend to [differ from what dads do](#). Women are often saddled with 'time-structuring' tasks that have to be done at a certain time of day, like feeding and dressing a child, or those tasks that take a lot of time, like staying home with a sick kid. On the other hand, 'time-flexible' tasks such as helping a child with her homework, are shared more equally between mothers and fathers. Across Europe and Australia, fathers' involvement varies, but in all countries mothers perform the majority of time-structuring tasks. In the figure below we show the proportion of households per country where fathers do at least as much childcare as mothers do, with different bars for structured and flexible childcare tasks. As can be seen, although time-flexible tasks are divided quite evenly between moms and dads, it is far rarer for dads to equally share time-structuring tasks. In the figure below, fathers' share of involvement in time-structuring childcare tasks is a mean scale of whether the respondents or their partners were more involved in: dressing the children, putting the children to bed, staying home with the children when sick, and taking the children to school. The time-flexible measure is a mean scale of involvement in playing with children and helping them with homework. Responses were recoded such that 0 = always the mother and 4 = always the father. The bars in the figure below represent the proportion of respondents per country with a score of 2 (father and mother share tasks equally) or higher (father does more than the mother).

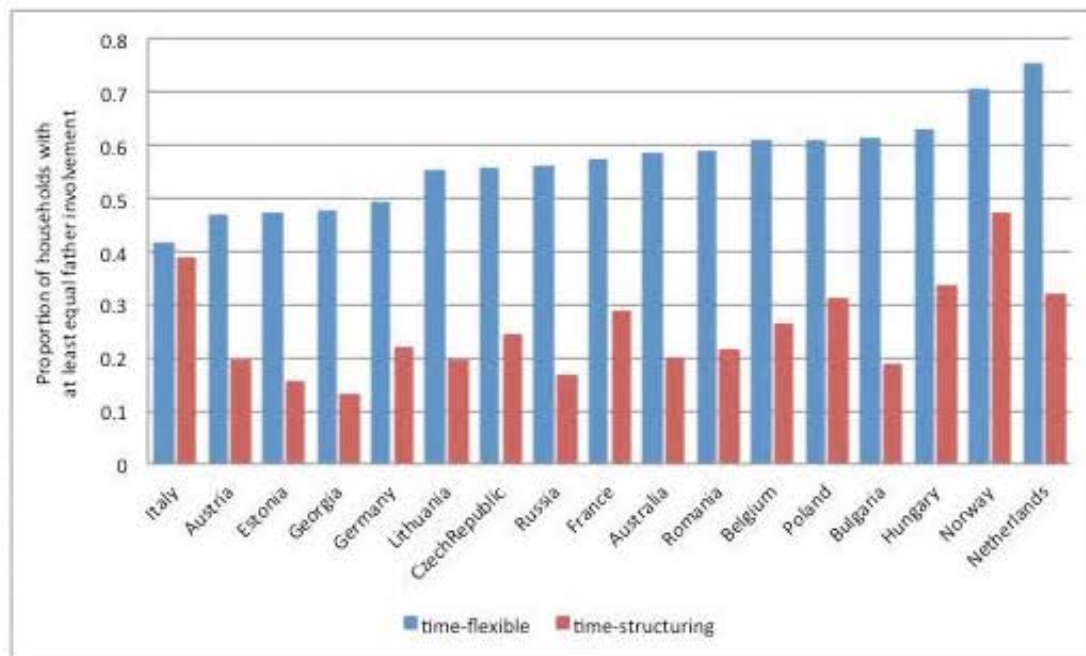


Figure 1: Father involvement in childcare tasks

**Dual-earners + dual-carers = true partnership** Whether and how much childcare dads do is only part of the story. The other part is who does care tasks when neither parent is willing or able. In some cases the answer lies with the state, market, grandparents, or other friends and family members. But in many cases, when picking a child up from school is in conflict with both parents' work schedules, the mother is the one expected to adjust her schedule for the afternoon carpool. Bearing the burden of childcare is tiring for moms and it can put stress on their careers and relationships. When dads take over time-structuring childcare tasks while moms are at work, they are doing more to encourage their partners' careers and happiness than when they do tasks that either parent could easily accommodate in their schedule. In particular, we were interested in whether fathers increase their share of involvement when mothers work more hours. If they do, it would mean moms and dads are to some extent working together to divide paid work and childcare. If they don't it may mean mothers are saddled with childcare responsibility regardless of their responsibilities at work. Although mothers' work hours and fathers' share of involvement do appear to be directly linked, the strength of this relationship varies across countries. Fathers are especially quick to assume time-structuring childcare tasks when mothers work more hours a week, such that full-time working mothers have partners who are half a point more involved in time-structuring tasks (on the same 0-4 scale described in relation to Figure 1) but only a quarter point more involved in time-flexible tasks compared to mothers who only work 1 hour per week (see Figure 2). In interpreting what these coefficients actually imply in terms of how much fathers react to mothers' work hours, it is also important to keep in mind that large differences exist in average maternal working hours between Eastern and Western Europe. According to our data, mothers in Western Europe are much more likely to work part-time while mothers in Eastern Europe are more likely to work full time or even overtime. Despite these differences, our research suggests that there is a positive relationship in most countries between the involvement of fathers in time-structuring tasks and the number of hours mothers work, i.e. men are on average more involved in time-structuring tasks



when their partners work more hours. The figure below shows the strength of the relationship between the hours that mothers work and fathers' share of structuring and flexible childcare tasks (controlling for the hours that moms work, mother's and father's educational attainment, father's age, number of children, having any pre-school aged children in the house, and whether the primary respondent was a man or a woman). The dots are the estimates of the relationship between mothers' work hours and fathers' share of childcare, and the lines represent the confidence intervals.

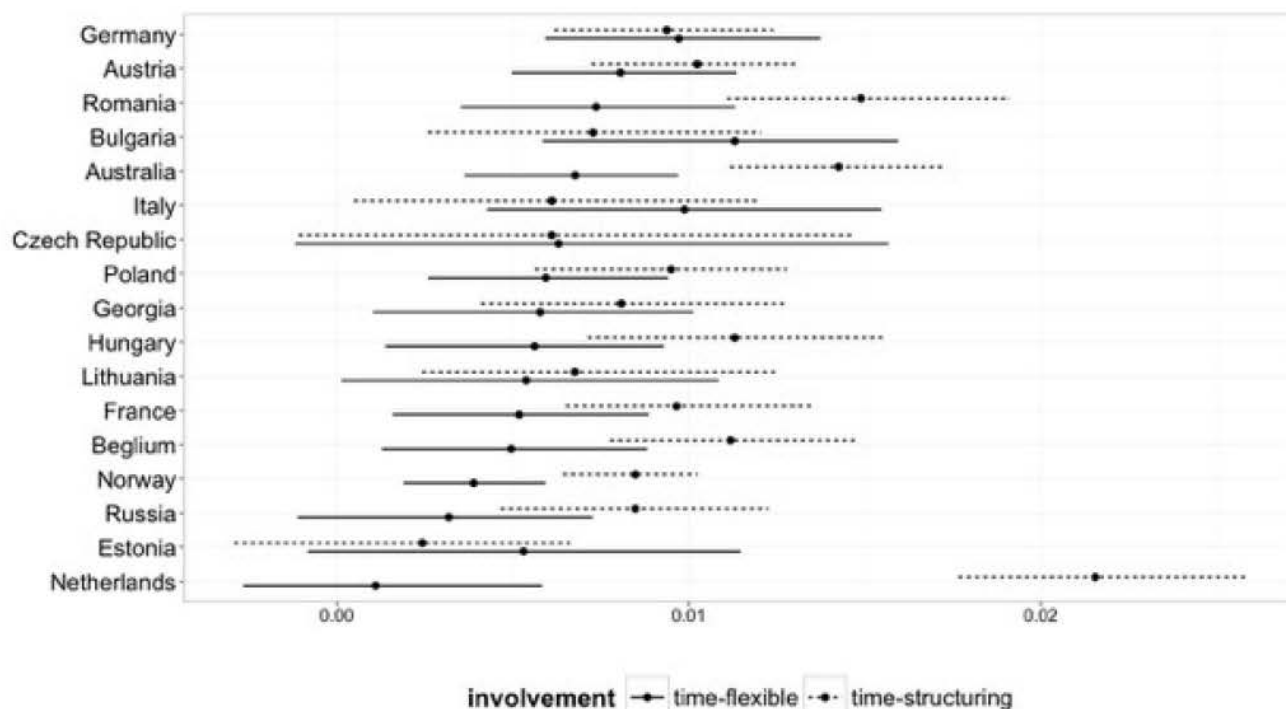


Figure 2. Point estimates and credible intervals of the relationship between mother's work hours and father's share of involvement in time-flexible and time-structuring tasks

How to make sense of cross-national differences? The countries where fathers are the most responsive to women's work hours are a mix of Western and Eastern European countries. Much cross-national research suggests that ["father-friendly"](#) regimes would follow an East-West/ South-North gradient, where Eastern and Southern European countries are less father-friendly than Western and Northern European countries. Our research instead does not show any clear clusterization. This is possibly because the relationship between mothers' work hours and fathers' share of childcare is dependent on three factors: fathers' willingness, ability, and need to take over care tasks. Any two of these factors without the third will not lead to an increase in father involvement. For example, fathers may be willing and able to partake in childcare, but they may not need to because good alternatives to fathers' childcare already exist, such as high-quality, state subsidized daycare. Although parental leave is generous in Norway and gender equality according to the [Gender Empowerment Measure](#) was high at the time of the survey, suggesting that fathers are both willing and able to assume childcare while mothers are at work, Norwegian children under three have one of the [highest rates of childcare usage](#) in Europe. Thus, need for some types of father care is low, perhaps explaining why the association between mothers' work hours and fathers' share of childcare is modest compared to other countries. Similarly, Bulgaria, like

Norway, has 14 days of fully paid paternity leave and a high rate of labor market participation among mothers, constituting both a need and the ability for fathers to assume childcare tasks, yet fathers are slow to assume care tasks when their partners work more hours, perhaps because of individual resistance to father involvement. Concluding, research shows that while the [gender gap in employment](#) has shrunk over the past decades, [the gender gap in childcare persists](#). Even when fathers want to be involved, they may find themselves trapped between work and family obligations, often without enough support from policymakers to balance their many responsibilities in a way that's fair to their partners, their kids, and themselves. For fathers to help their partners, and in doing so, help themselves, they need to be able to take time off from work without worrying about the negative effect it may have on their careers. Paternity leave is an important way to kick start fathers' involvement because it encourages men to hold dual identities as wage earners and child carers. But it's not enough. Men need to be able to adjust their work hours to pick their kids up from school, or stay home one day if their kids are sick, all without having to worry about how their involvement as fathers will reflect on their job performance ratings. It's not fair to mothers or fathers if only mothers are expected to adjust their work schedules to accommodate childcare. Stronger policy measures need to be taken to bridge the childcare gap between parents. *This post is based on an article by Brett Ory, Renske Keizer, and Pearl A. Dykstra, Mothers' work hours and father' share of childcare in cross-national perspective, forthcoming. Research is funded by the European Research Council Advanced Investigator Grant (ERC, 324211) "Families in Context".*