

Changing Gendered Attitudes Toward Childcare: Social-Economic Determinants of Understanding Family Roles Among Lithuanian Parents

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The parental choices need more explanation on how the perceptions of family gender roles could explain the differences in parental satisfaction with childcare and domestic division and what social-economic factors determine their normative attitudes. In other words, the paper analyses how families' attitudes to childcare division are related to their socioeconomic backgrounds and normative preferences on gender roles. The paper uses the representative population survey data of Lithuania's working-age generation cohort (34–48 years old). The main results reveal that parental preferences for childcare allocation are mostly shaped by their economic status and traditional gender roles in contrast to the country's widely accessible active labour market and family welfare system.

Keywords: gendered parenting, childcare division, Lithuania, families

INTRODUCTION

As the issues in family-work reconciliation and parental professional engagement became significant goals for welfare regimes, interest in explaining gendered patterns and family expectations for household and childcare division has also progressed (OECD 2011). Numerous research has been done to explain how different socioeconomic and demographic factors affect childcare choices and domestic labour division for dual-earner and single-earner European families (Newkirk 2017; Dominguez-Folgueras 2022; Martín-García et al. 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that parental income, poverty, age, education, ethnicity, occupational status, and especially female engagement in the labour market determine gendered childcare choices and parental satisfaction. Among the variety of social, demographic and economic determinants, the impact of government programs on helping parents cope with family-work obligations is also essential, e.g. support for formal childcare. The need for knowledge of parental satisfaction with domestic early childcare also leads to a broader normative discussion on gendered patterns, including changing female and male roles in public life.

In the Lithuanian research on family and childcare, the main findings uncover the changes in the family model and gender relations in both the public and private spheres, especially when defining the family concept from a normative perspective. The other part of national research focuses on the marriage change and dilemmas of balancing professional and family obligations, parental gendering models and parental roles concerning welfare models (Maslauskaitė, Tereškinas 2017; Steinbach, Maslauskaitė 2020; Aidukaitė et al. 2020; Maslauskaitė 2023) as well as parental attitude to early childcare (Brazienė, Daukantienė 2010; Bučaitė-Vilkė 2021) and parental satisfaction after divorces (Maslauskaitė, Tereškinas 2019; 2020). We explain the relationships between dual-earner parental satisfaction with early childcare task division and normative parental attitudes to family roles. Our theoretical assumption states that gendered parental roles and responsibilities are fundamentally shaped by differences in economic resources and the allocation of time, influencing the distinct ways family roles are fulfilled (Dominguez-Folgueras 2022).

We include social-demographic and economic indicators such as parental education, income, residence place, and age. The article is based on a representative survey data sample of the working-age cohort (34–48 years old) in Lithuania in 2019 that focused on the transitional family changes and social and economic inequalities during the last two decades in Lithuania. We assume that more egalitarian gendered childcare roles lead to higher parental satisfaction with childcare and domestic division, which could be explained by social-demographic and economic determinants (age, education and income).

The paper is structured into several sections. After explaining the theoretical model on changes in understanding parental childcare division, we present the country-specific contextual factors. The third section presents methodological notes, including the dataset, sample, variables, and statistical analysis approach. Finally, we discuss the findings from statistical analysis and structural equation modelling.

PARENTAL CHILDCARE DIVISION AS A MODERN DILEMMA: ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE OR NORMATIVE BEHAVIOUR?

Due to the changing understanding of traditional breadwinner and woman-caregiver models, the burden of household responsibilities is shared with the other family members, or a part of the responsibilities is transferred to one of the spouses or partners. The division of parental household duties, including childcare, cannot be analysed without a normative understanding of gender. Family and gender research provides a significant amount of explanation on how the distribution of household responsibilities within the family is related to career choices, the quality of marital or partnership relationships, kinship ties, gender ideology and the construction of gender roles, fertility intentions, the reconciliation of professional obligations and family life (Coltrane 2000; Dominguez-Folgueras 2022). We elaborate on the theoretical model explaining the relationship between parental roles and expectations in childcare, homecare division, and social-economic and demographic indicators. By using a reference to gendered roles, we assume that there is no gender-neutral position to family roles because of economic differences in time and resource distribution between parents (Dominguez-Folgueras 2022: 84). The model represents the main theoretical constructs that provide the framework for the operationalisation (Fig. 1). We hypothesise that both parents' gendered roles and attitudes relate to their general satisfaction with childcare (A) and homecare division at home (B). Besides, the socio-demographic and economic factors influence the model's main constructs:

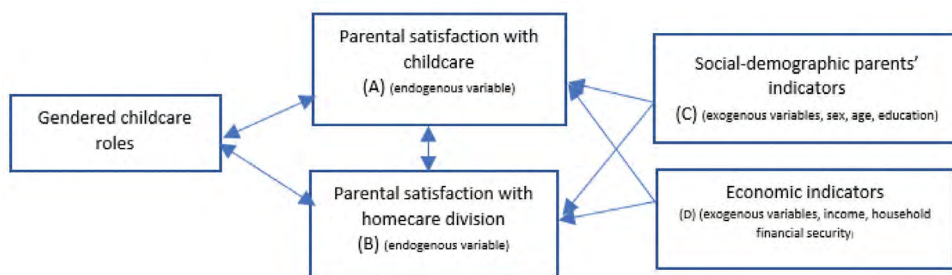


Fig. 1. Theoretical model on the relationships between endogenous (independent) and exogenous (dependent) variables

age, sex, education, residence place (C), and financial status (D). These variables derive from the previous research on parental childcare preferences and gendered practices, which underlines the relationship between strategies of household responsibilities and socioeconomic determinants, including changes in marital status (Brines 1994; Baxter 2005; Baxter et al. 2008). According to research, the unequal gap in routine household duties might be influenced by different factors, including transitions in parenthood, changes in professional life, and more conceptual gender role models (Ciccia, Bleijenbergh 2014).

We start with parental satisfaction with childcare in families that rely on normative explanations. Carrying out household chores is symbolically perceived as a female occupation; on the contrary, the ability to earn money is a male occupation. The division of domestic responsibilities in the family is not based on economic exchange but is treated as a symbolic and normative expression of gender roles (Deutsch 2007, Risman 2009). How do we explain the relationship between parental childcare preferences and domestic childcare division? The economic dependence approach focuses on the pattern of gender roles in families using the concept of economic exchange. Women's economic employment and occupational status have little influence on men's participation in household work division. The economic nature of gender relations in the division of household responsibilities could be analysed as a strong determinant in supporting traditional gendered parental preferences (Bianchi et al. 2000; Bartley et al. 2005). A partner with more resources, such as education, income, professional status, and social prestige, uses the available advantages to negotiate with a partner/spouse to divide household chores and childcare (Bittman et al. 2003; Mona et al. 2008; Lütolf et al. 2023).

The argument on the childcare division hypothesis also supports the intertwined economic and normative explanation. Various normative and economic structures, for example, the dominant social norm of male breadwinners, vertical and horizontal gendered segregation of the labour market, and the specificity of family policies, may determine gender role asymmetry. The smaller the difference between partners/spouses' income, the more equal the sharing of household responsibilities is, and vice versa (Coltrane 2000; Baxter et al. 2008). The more economically dependent men are on their partners/wives because of unemployment or loss of income, the more they try to compensate for the 'traditional' gender role by taking on some household chores and childcare (Brines 1994). Finally, there are significant differences between the dynamics of the breadwinner model and the change in gender roles

not only in the economic sphere but also at the micro-relational level. In the universal breadwinner model, factors of economic employment and gender roles become important variables defining the roles and responsibilities of the father and mother (Lewis, Giullari 2005; Bleijenbergh 2014).

To frame our analysis, we combine major theoretical concepts to define the relationship between the socioeconomic status of parents, gendered expectations, and parental satisfaction. Our theoretical model contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamic interplay of these factors in shaping parental roles and attitudes. In contrast to the previous research on parental roles and satisfaction, we contribute to this field by proposing a nuanced understanding of how socioeconomic status and parental satisfaction influence family decision-making in distributing domestic duties.

LITHUANIAN CONTEXT: TOWARDS UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE SYSTEM AND PARENTAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The article discusses the relationship between parental socioeconomic and demographic factors and their childcare choices, focusing on gender role differentiation. Significant changes in female employment rates, the impact of the availability of early childhood services on parental choices and the national parental leave system are considered as a combination of the social, demographic and institutional settings that are important in this article. We focus on the two contextual multi-level factors that influence our assumption on gendered parental choices in families: early-age childcare service system and its availability, and labour market participation of males and females in the age group of 25–54 years old. The first factor in early-age childcare represents a wide range of policy issues, such as the diversity and coverage of family policy tools, access to childcare services, family roles and parental involvement in the labour market promoted by the European policy.

In Lithuania, we consider the national design of an early-age childcare services system for families with young children who continue their professional lives. Despite the national policy goal for a universal and territorially equalised ECEC system in Lithuania, disparities in access and quality between urban and rural areas challenge the effectiveness of the childcare policy, including targeted improvements to guarantee equal access for all age groups. Additionally, the ECEC system's capacity issues for enrollment, particularly in densely populated urban and suburban areas, need to meet the increasing demand for childcare among working parents. For example, early-age children's (1–2 years old) enrolment in formal childcare schemes is relatively low compared to other age groups (Fig. 2). This tendency is explained by looking at the parental leave schemes, which offer flexible childcare benefits until the child reaches the age of two or care for a child under three without benefits but guarantee job retention.

The main challenge is the availability and supply of early childhood education services for working families in urban and rural areas. The ECEC system needs more resource distribution, funding allocation, and political priorities in rural and urban territories. Urban municipalities face the challenge of high demand for childcare services; on the contrary, rural areas have supply issues because of geographical distances and facilities coverage (Report 2018). If we consider the data on children's enrolment in the kindergarten system in Lithuania, the territorial differences are very significant. Between 2010 and 2022, the share of children enrolled in preschool education in urban areas has increased significantly (Fig. 2).

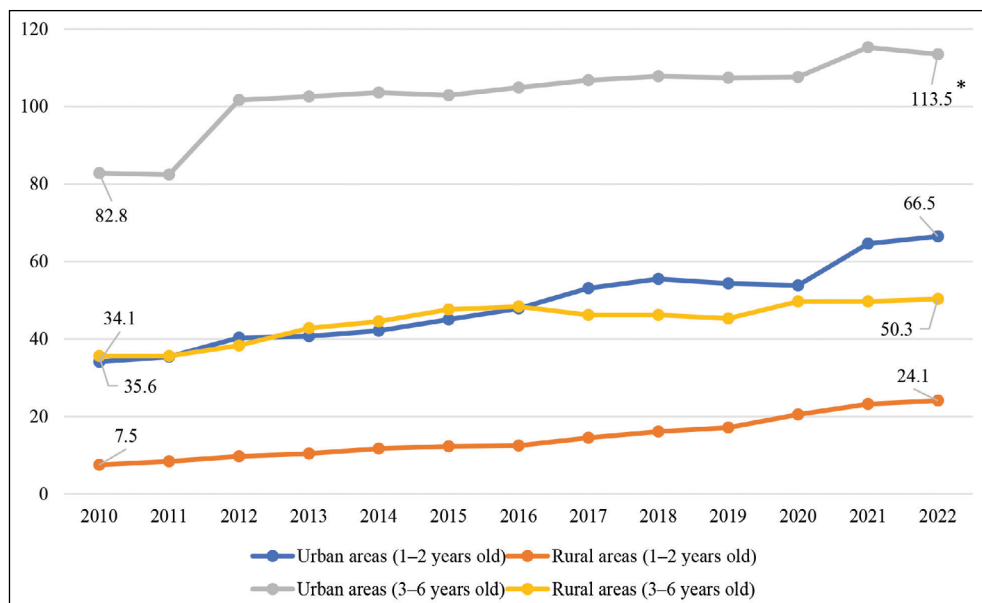


Fig. 2. Enrolment in preschool and pre-primary education, %, 2010–2022. Official Statistics Lithuania, 2024; * Percentage for urban areas enrolment exceeds 100% as an indicator of mismatch between surplus and supply

For example, in the group of children aged 1–2, the share of enrolment has doubled, from 34.1% in 2010 to 66.5% in 2022. Research shows that parents living in rural areas support the benefits-in-cash system rather than formal childcare services mainly because of household socioeconomic barriers. Parental struggles with a low income, unemployment, and the lack of affordable ECEC services infrastructure might determine childcare choices (Bucaite-Vilke 2021).

Second, for the last decades, European governments have considered the growing intervention of childcare policies that support male and especially female labour market participation (OECD 2011). Different social-economic aspects, including an active promotion of male and female participation in the labour market, become essential for designing institutional childcare systems (Lewis, Giullari 2005; Leira, Saraceno 2008). In this sense, national parental leave instruments and formal childcare schemes aim to ensure working parents' chances to reduce barriers in their professional lives. The parental choices for childcare could be determined by the cultural ideals and social norms that define family gender arrangements (Pfau-Effinger 1998).

Considering the explanation of parental childcare preferences, we pay attention to the existing data on labour market engagement for both parents, especially for females. The female employment rate in Lithuania is considered one of the highest among the other European Union countries. Since 2010, the female labour market participation rate has continuously grown alongside male participation. In 2023, the total female employment rate reached over 83.2%, and for men, it reached 86.1% (Official Statistics Lithuania 2024) (Fig. 3).

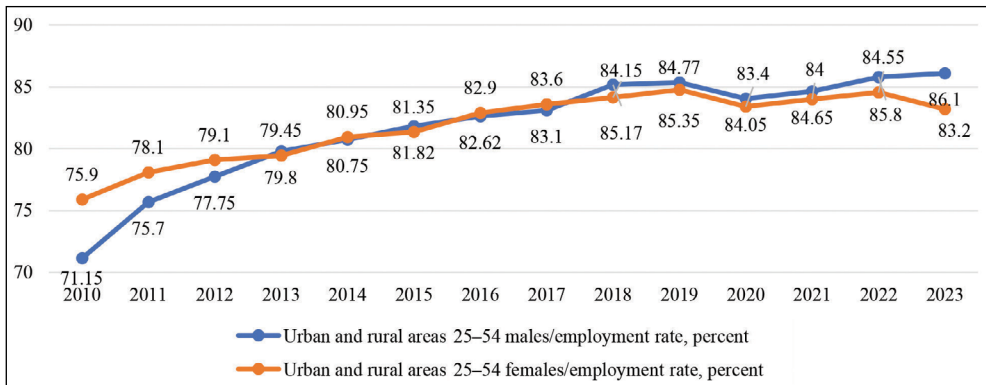


Fig. 3. Female and male employment rate, age 25–64, percentage, 2010–2023, Official Statistics Lithuania, 2024

The statistical data indicate that despite the highly developed formal childcare system and increasing female employment rate, the enrollment of early-age children in formal care arrangements still needs to be improved for parents. Childcare decision-making is complex for working parents in terms of parental preferences and satisfaction, economic opportunities and the institutional family welfare policy design (Lewis, Giullari 2005).

MEASUREMENT MODEL AND VARIABLES

Data and Research Approach

The empirical data for our analysis is a part of the representative population survey ‘Families and Inequalities’ conducted in Lithuania in 2019 as a part of the research project ‘Families, Inequalities and Demographic Processes’. The survey was designed using the birth cohort of respondents born in 1970–1984 to uncover their active period of the family life course. The overall dataset consisted of respondents from the 34–48-year-old cohort ($N = 3005$). Personal interviews in private households were used to collect empirical data. We use specific survey questions for our empirical analysis on gendered role preferences, childcare preferences, and parental satisfaction with childcare and homecare division.

Measurement Model and Variables

Given the complexity of our theoretical model, we focus on the constructs that contribute to the assumption that gendered parental roles are not gender-neutral and relate to differences in economic resources and timing used to fulfill different family duties. We use them as measurable independent variables, such as the gendered roles of childcare and satisfaction with the division of childcare.

Structural equation modelling (partial least squares (PLS) model) helps to test our hypotheses presented in the theoretical model (Fig. 1). The theoretical assumptions on gendered parental preferences incorporate independent (e.g. exogenous) and dependent variables (e.g. endogenous), as discussed in Fig. 1 on the complex relationship between parental childcare preferences and gendered practices. Using the SmrtPLS3 software, we conducted

both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, along with a statistical evaluation of the model to assess its consistency. The PLS modelling method allows for assessing the direct and indirect effects among endogenous and exogenous variables and provides a comprehensive understanding of the pathways through which socioeconomic and demographic factors impact parental childcare attitudes.

Endogenous (Dependent) Variables

Referring to theoretical literature, we have identified the variables of parental gendered satisfaction with childcare and domestic division and gender role preferences (Lachance-Grzeła et al. 2010; Craig et al. 2011; Sayer, Gornick 2011). Multiple items measured the 'gendered childcare roles' variable using the factor analysis. As reference questions, the respondents were asked to evaluate their preferences for different gender roles in public life and family obligations. A survey question contained the answers on approval to "*What are your preferences on different male and female roles in public and private life or independently on gender*" (suitable exclusively for male ('1')/suitable exclusively for female ('5') – 5 points Likert scale). We used exploratory factor analysis (Brown, 2015) to define three items: '*Female and male responsibility to take care of children and home*,' '*Female and male responsibility to earn money for the family*' and '*Which is better at caring for young child, men or women?*' We also included the survey items in the model that represent parental satisfaction with the childcare and homecare division. The respondents were asked to evaluate their preferences for childcare division at home between partners and their satisfaction level with sharing home labour (totally dissatisfied/fully satisfied – 10 points Likert rating scale).

Exogenous (Independent) Variables

The list of exogenous (independent) variables contains socio-demographic indicators of respondents (age, sex, education) and economic indicators such as the residence place's size and household's financial security. We have included the survey question asking respondents to indicate their household financial security level using a 10-point Likert scale. Referring to the official statistics on residence dispersion in Lithuania, we have reduced the size of the residential place variable into several groups.

Finally, the model consists of six endogenous and six exogenous latent constructs ($N = 3005$). The final list of items was defined using a casewise elimination procedure. The normality and linearity of variables were measured by loading variables into our model using the bootstrapping procedure. The measurement model exhibited a satisfactory fit for empirical data.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS: CHANGING GENDERED ATTITUDES TO PARENTAL ROLES

Numerous research studies have identified the reasons for the gendered division of domestic labour and childcare duties, where the impact of paternalistic or egalitarian institutional arrangements plays an essential role in parental preferences (Craig, Mullan, 2011). The Lithuanian economic and social transition from 1990'ies appears as an important context in understanding the complexity of childcare division choices and preferences towards a more egalitarian parental agenda mainly because of parental leave schemes. The cross-country study on parenting in Lithuania and Belarus by Steinbach and Maslauskaitė (2020) demonstrates that, primarily due to parental leave schemes, mothers bear more responsibility for

domestic childcare tasks, while fathers are tasked with non-routine responsibilities, deviating from a more egalitarian parental agenda (Steinbach, Maslauskaitė 2020). Our descriptive data has also revealed a statistically significant difference in how men and women evaluate their gendered preferences in defining different public and private gender roles in general (Table 1). Gender category has an effect in evaluating the preferences for taking political leadership roles between men and women. The difference between the two sex groups is also statistically significant in evaluating the importance of having a job and taking responsibility for children and domestic division. For example, male respondents prefer supporting higher female roles in caring for domestic division and childcare. The differences between gender roles in achieving higher education, earning money for the family, or taking care of small kids are not statistically significant. We are primarily concerned with the gender role differences in different private and public fields that highlight the evolving dynamics of gendered expectations and shifts in divisions of responsibilities within families. To frame our analysis, the results contribute to discussing gender role differences in public and private spheres, especially in the economic and political fields (Table 1).

According to our data, the evaluation of the priorities of early childhood care differs significantly. These differences are especially evident when looking at groups of children of different ages. Our study asked how preschool children should be cared for in different age categories (Fig. 4). If we look at parents' priorities for early-age childcare, most respondents (82.3%) unequivocally state that children under the age of 1 should be cared for at home, where these duties are performed by non-working mothers (on parental leave). As a child grows (from 1 to 3 years of age), such preferences change, and only 42.1% of parents support a domestic environment for childcare. The results suggest that parental provisions are affected by state-subsidised parental leave arrangements and the existing formal early-age childcare system provisions, including the pivotal role of the mother.

Table 1. Comparison of statistical means in gender role preferences of male and female

Gender role preferences	Sample	Mean	Std. Error	Lower (mean)	Upper (mean)
Who are better political leaders, men or women? **	Male (N = 1225)	2.53	.03	2.48	2.59
	Female (N = 1780)	2.86	.02	2.82	2.90
For whom is the university education more important in life, men or women?	Male	2.99	.02	2.95	3.04
	Female	3.08	.02	3.05	3.11
For whom is it more important to have a job, men or women? **	Male	2.72	.02	2.67	2.76
	Female	2.89	.01	2.86	2.92
Whose responsibility is it to look after the children and the home? **	Male	3.45	.03	3.40	3.50
	Female	3.32	.02	3.29	3.36
Whose responsibility is it to earn money for the family, men or women?	Male	2.42	.03	2.36	2.47
	Female	2.54	.02	2.50	2.58
Who is better at caring for young children, men or women?	Male	3.88	.03	3.83	3.94
	Female	3.85	.03	3.83	3.94

** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); T-test.

Data source: own calculations, 'Families and Inequalities' survey data, 2019.

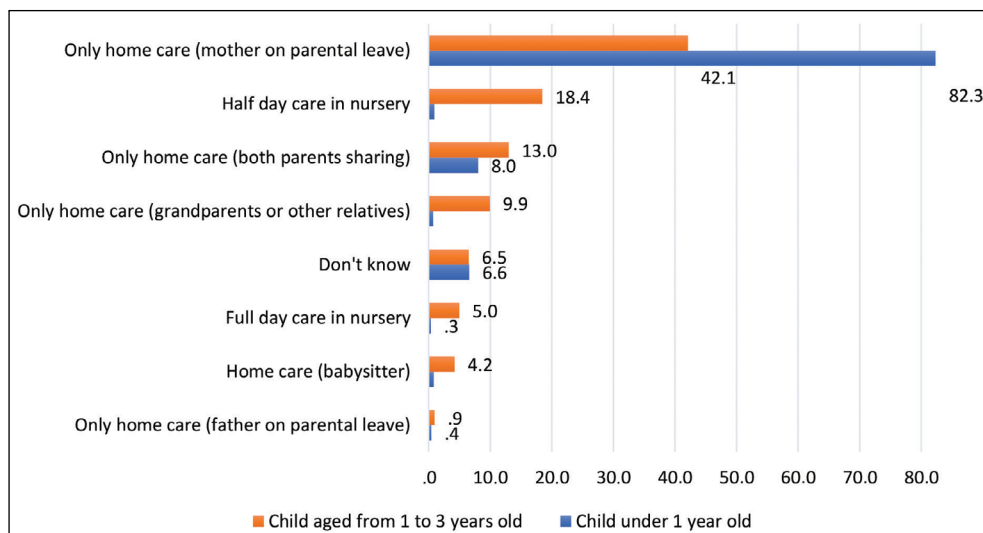


Fig. 4. Early age childcare choices of parents, percentage, $n = 3005$

Data source: own calculations, 'Families and Inequalities' survey data, 2019.

We assumed that parental satisfaction with childcare and homecare division at home would be explained using the determinants of gendered roles and attitudes and social-demographic and economic determinants. Structural equation modelling summarises the statistical predictions between social-demographic and economic determinants and gendered role variables (gendered childcare roles, parental satisfaction with childcare and domestic division) (Table 2). The path diagram omits some statistical relations for visual clarity and presents significant correlations between endogenous and exogenous variables (Fig. 5).

Table 2. Results of the main model

Effects	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Age → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.024	0.999	0.318
Gendered childcare roles → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.024	2.349	0.019**
Education → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.026	1.139	0.255
Sex → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.023	1.916	0.055
Financial security → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.032	4.441	0**
Satisfaction with domestic division → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.03	20.71	0**
Residence place size → Satisfaction with childcare division	0.025	1.682	0.093

Note: ** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Own calculations.

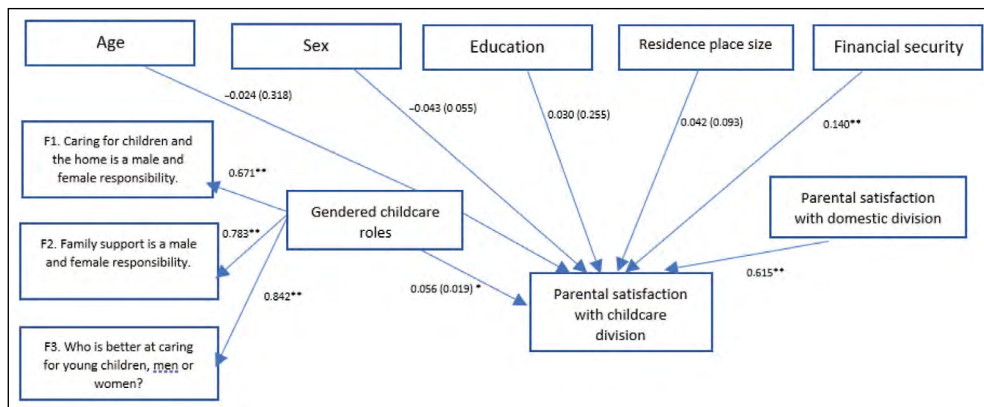


Fig. 5. Structural model results (PLS model)

Notes: For maintaining the clarity in visualisation, the figure does not include all statistical relationships, method: partial least squares modelling. * and ** statistically significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Model fit: $\chi^2 = 78.8$ ($p = 0.00$), $df = 35$, RMSEA = 0.046, CFI = 0.981, TLI = 0.949. Own calculations.

Considering the findings of the main model, surprisingly, the individual determinants of age, sex, education, and residence place have no significant effect on parental satisfaction with the childcare division. We found that economic determinants of households are relevant in explaining gendered family roles. A positive statistical relationship exists between the household's financial security and the level of satisfaction with childcare allocation between partners/spouses. Higher economic stability is more likely to impact higher childcare division satisfaction positively. Parental satisfaction with the domestic division positively relates to the childcare division satisfaction indicator. It is more likely that respondents who are more satisfied with splitting home duties equally among partners are more likely to have higher satisfaction with sharing childcare duties. The higher the satisfaction with the domestic division was, the more positive the evaluation of childcare was recorded. Our analysis assumes that a moderate statistical relationship exists between predictors of gendered childcare roles and satisfaction with childcare allocation in families. The higher the gender division in public and family roles among the sexes, meaning that females should take higher responsibilities in private life, the higher parental satisfaction with childcare division among respondents. Contrary to our previous expectations of changing egalitarian gender roles in families, we find that more traditional gender role perceptions lead to higher childcare division satisfaction.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper aims to understand changing gendered attitudes on childcare in Lithuanian families and find the statistical explanation for socioeconomic determinants in explaining family roles and the path to more egalitarian family roles. Despite the significant advancement in state-subsidised and territoriality-equalised early childcare systems in the country, there are different parental preferences in choosing early-age childcare. The changing understanding of parental public and private roles and the effects of individual social-demographic and economic factors play a predominant role in defining parenting. Our statistical dataset allows us

to contribute to the relationship between parental gendered attitudes and a portion of their childcare and domestic responsibilities.

How do we explain the asymmetry in micro-level gender ideologies of parents and their input on household division? First, our analysis indicates that higher satisfaction with domestic division leads to a more positive evaluation of childcare allocation and the explanation of equally organised households. On the other hand, the model suggests asymmetry in gendered childcare roles. The higher the perception of the female role in housework responsibilities, the higher the general satisfaction with childcare. Despite the well-developed formal childcare system, parental preferences reflect a more traditional approach to childcare allocation. This argument is supported by similar studies in Lithuania emphasising higher female support for the traditional division of childcare (Steinbach, Maslauskaitė 2020).

Second, the factor of financial security in satisfaction with the childcare division might lead to the importance of the economic stability of households. Although the level of female participation in the labour market is high in Lithuania, the interplay between the economic independence of females and parental satisfaction with childcare division at home is consequential to gendered parenting. Numerous research studies on housework allocation between parents indicate that despite the high female engagement in the labour market, their childcare duties at home did not decrease accordingly (Guryan et al. 2008; Craig et al. 2011; García-Román et al. 2016). Mothers face multitasking difficulties in reconciling their professional roles and caring for their children with the double burden of responsibilities (García-Román et al. 2016). Although the employment and social policies, including the advancement of formal early childcare systems, have made a considerable progress, the individually constructed gender ideologies reflect the micro-level parenting decisions made along traditional lines.

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JURGA BUČAITĖ-VILKĖ

Kintantis lyčių požiūris į vaikų priežiūrą: socialiniai ir ekonominiai veiksniai, lemiantys tėvų vaidmenų sampratą Lietuvoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje diskutuojama, kokie veiksniai gali paaikškinti tėvų pasitenkinimo vaikų priežiūra ir namų ūkio įsipareigojimais skirtumus ir kokie socialiniai bei ekonominiai veiksniai lemia jų normatyvines nuostatas dėl skirtingų lyčių vaidmenų šeimose. Kitaip tariant, straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti, kaip tėvų požiūris į vaikų priežiūros pasidalijimą šeimoje yra susijęs su jų socialine ir ekonomine padėtimi bei normatyviniais lyčių vaidmenų pasirinkimais. Straipsnyje naudojami reprezentatyvios Lietuvos darbingo amžiaus gyventojų apklausos, kurią sudarė darbingo amžiaus respondentų imtis (34–48 metų amžiaus kohorta), duomenys. Pagrindiniai rezultatai atskleidžia, kad, nepaisant šalyje plačiai prieinamos darbo ir užimtumo rinkos bei plačios aprėpties vaikų ikimokyklinės priežiūros sistemos, tėvų požiūrį dėl vaikų priežiūros vaidmenų paskirstymo labiausiai lemia jų ekonominė padėtis ir tradiciniai lyčių vaidmenys.

Raktažodžiai: vaikų priežiūros pasidalijimas, Lietuva, lyčių vaidmenys šeimose