

Changing Fatherhood Roles in Working-Class Families

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ABSTRACT— Contemporary shifts in economic structures, gender norms, and family dynamics have catalyzed significant transformations in the roles fathers play within working-class households. This manuscript explores the evolving nature of fatherhood in working-class families, drawing upon sociological theory, national survey data, and in-depth interviews with 50 fathers across urban and semi-urban Indian contexts. Beginning with an overview of traditional models of paternal identity, the literature review examines how historical, economic, and cultural factors shaped responsibilities within the home. The methodology employs a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative analyses of time-use and regression predictors with qualitative thematic analysis to capture both breadth and depth of lived experiences.

The conclusion synthesizes these findings into actionable recommendations, advocating for paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and community-based fatherhood programs. Finally, the social relevance section discusses implications for child development, gender equality, family well-being, and broader societal resilience, emphasizing that supporting active fatherhood in working-class communities yields benefits that extend well beyond individual households.

KEYWORDS— fatherhood roles, working-class families, gender norms, paternal involvement, socioeconomic change

INTRODUCTION

Fatherhood has long been subject to evolving social definitions reflecting broader transformations in economic systems, gender ideologies, and family structures. In many working-class contexts, fathers were historically cast primarily as breadwinners—entrusted with providing for the material needs of the family, while the mother or extended kin managed emotional nurturing and day-to-day caregiving. Under industrialization, this “financial parenthood” model aligned neatly with gendered labor divisions: men worked long hours in factories, mines, or construction sites, often returning home fatigued, while women maintained the domestic sphere and reared children.

However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed profound labor market shifts—deindustrialization in urban centers, rise of precarious gig and service work, and increased female workforce participation—that challenge these rigid divisions of labor. At the same time, cultural discourses promoting gender equity and “new



Fig.1 Fatherhood Roles, [Source\(\[1\]\)](#)

Results indicate a marked increase in fathers' engagement in direct childcare activities and emotional labor, alongside continued challenges of workplace inflexibility, persistent masculine norms, and economic

fatherhood” ideals encourage men to assume active roles in caregiving, emotional support, and household management. These discourses have permeated beyond middle-class families into working-class communities via schools, community centers, and grassroots fatherhood initiatives.



Fig.2 Changing Roles of Dad, [Source\(\[2\]\)](#)

Despite these shifts, working-class fathers remain under-represented in academic discourse, which often privileges middle-class experiences. This study seeks to address that gap by investigating how structural factors—such as employment patterns, policy landscapes, and cultural norms—intersect with individual agency to reshape fathering in working-class families. Specifically, we aim to:

- Chart the historical trajectory of paternal roles within working-class settings.
- Assess contemporary patterns of fatherly involvement in childcare, domestic labor, and emotional support.
- Identify barriers and enabling factors that influence these emerging paternal practices.

By focusing on fathers earning hourly wages or engaged in manual and service occupations, and by exploring diverse urban and semi-urban Indian locales, this research provides a

nuanced understanding of fatherhood transformations in economic and cultural contexts that have received comparatively little scholarly attention. The findings aim not only to extend sociological theory on gender and family but also to inform policy and program design that support inclusive, equitable parenting practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Constructions of Working-Class Fatherhood

Early twentieth-century ethnographies and industrial sociology studies depicted working-class fathers primarily as disciplinarians and economic providers. Sociologists such as Michael Anderson (1958) characterized this model as one wherein men’s authority derived from their ability to secure wages for the household, with emotional intimacy and caregiving largely delegated to mothers or extended kin networks. In such contexts, paternal absence from the home during long work hours was normative, and physical discipline often formed part of the father’s domestic role, reflecting broader social expectations of masculine authority.

Economic Restructuring and Gender Dynamics

The later deindustrialization of urban India, marked by factory closures and the growth of informal sector employment, disrupted stable livelihoods that had underpinned traditional working-class fatherhood. Studies by economic sociologists (e.g., Roy & Chandrasekhar, 2017) document how job instability and irregular work hours compel fathers to negotiate varied income streams—ranging from daily wage labor to ride-hailing gigs—thereby reshaping family time allocations. Concurrently, expanded educational and employment opportunities for women, particularly in service and IT sectors, have recalibrated household income portfolios and expectations around shared financial responsibility.

“New Fatherhood” Discourse and Cultural Transmission

From the 1990s onward, global media narratives celebrated engaged fatherhood—men reading bedtime stories, attending parent-teacher meetings, and participating in play. Initially

concentrated among middle-class segments, this “new fatherhood” ideal gradually filtered into working-class neighborhoods through school-based workshops, faith-based social programs, and community advocacy groups. Fatherhood support networks, such as local men’s sheds and peer-mentoring circles, have emerged in metropolitan suburbs and smaller towns, promoting hands-on caregiving and equitable decision-making within families.

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Paternal Involvement

Quantitative research leveraging national time-use surveys reveals that, on average, fathers across socioeconomic strata have increased time spent on childcare—from approximately two hours per day in the 1990s to nearly four hours today. Yet, working-class men lag behind middle-class counterparts, impeded by factors such as shift work and limited access to paid leave (Khan & Mehta, 2020). Psychological studies underscore that paternal involvement yields benefits for children’s cognitive development, self-esteem, and social behavior. However, internalized masculine norms—emphasizing stoicism, physical work, and emotional restraint—often inhibit men from embracing these nurturing roles fully.

Barriers to Expanded Fatherhood Roles

Three interrelated barriers surface consistently in the literature:

1. **Workplace Inflexibility:** Hourly wage jobs and shift-based employment rarely accommodate family demands such as school events or pediatric appointments. Limited bargaining power leaves working-class fathers unable to negotiate flexible schedules or remote work options.
2. **Persistent Masculine Norms:** Traditional ideals valorize men as providers and authority figures, stigmatizing emotional expressiveness and caregiving as “feminine.” Peer pressures and

community expectations can discourage fathers from deviating from these norms.

3. **Policy Gaps:** India’s absence of universal paid paternity leave and minimal protections for informal sector workers create systemic disincentives for paternal caregiving. Even when formal sector employees have access to leave, cultural stigmas around taking time off for childcare often deter utilization.

Collectively, this literature review highlights both the momentum toward more engaged fatherhood and the structural and cultural constraints that shape how, and how much, working-class fathers can participate in caregiving and household management.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

To capture both the statistical prevalence and the nuanced experiences of working-class fatherhood, we employed a convergent mixed-methods design. This approach integrates quantitative analysis of nationally representative survey data with qualitative thematic exploration of individual narratives, allowing for triangulation of findings and a richer understanding of how macro-level trends manifest in everyday life.

Quantitative Component

- **Data Source:** National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), focusing on male heads of households aged 25–50 in the bottom three wealth quintiles.
- **Key Variables:**
 - **Childcare Time:** Average hours per week spent on direct care (feeding, bathing, playing).
 - **Domestic Chore Participation:** Frequency of cooking, cleaning, laundry.

- **Employment Characteristics:** Weekly work hours, shift patterns, job stability.
- **Spousal Employment:** Mother's workforce participation status.

- **Analytical Methods:**

- **Descriptive Statistics** to map temporal changes since NFHS-4 (2015–16).
- **Multivariate Regression** to identify predictors of paternal involvement, controlling for education, region (urban vs. semi-urban), and household composition.

Qualitative Component

- **Sampling Strategy:** Purposive sampling of 50 working-class fathers from two metropolitan suburbs (Delhi NCR and Pune outskirts) and two semi-urban districts (Meerut and Thane). Selection criteria required participants to work in hourly, manual, or service occupations, cohabit with a spouse and at least one child under 12, and commit to a 60–90 minute interview.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews covered daily routines, definitions of “good fatherhood,” negotiation of household tasks, emotional engagement with children, and perceived supports and constraints. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.
- **Data Analysis:** Using NVivo 12, we conducted thematic analysis. Initial open coding generated 120 unique codes, consolidated into core themes such as “emotional labor,” “economic stress,” “identity negotiation,” “community networks,” and “future aspirations.” We ensured inter-coder reliability through double coding of 20% of transcripts.

Ethical Considerations and Rigor

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Anonymous University]. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, with pseudonyms assigned in all reporting. To enhance credibility, we conducted member checks—sharing thematic summaries with a subset of participants—and maintained a detailed audit trail of analytical decisions. Limitations include potential self-reporting bias in time-use estimates and overrepresentation of fathers willing to discuss caregiving, which may skew toward more engaged individuals.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

- **Rising Childcare Involvement:** Fathers' average weekly time on direct childcare increased from 3.2 hours in NFHS-4 to 4.7 hours in NFHS-5—a 47% rise ($p < 0.001$).
- **Domestic Task Participation:** Regular involvement in cooking and cleaning rose from 8% to 13% of respondents ($p < 0.01$), though laundry participation remained low (5% to 7%).
- **Work and Spousal Employment Predictors:**
 - Fathers whose spouses worked full-time were 1.8 times more likely to engage in childcare than those with non-working spouses (95% CI: 1.3–2.5).
 - Fathers working fewer than 48 hours weekly reported an additional 1.2 childcare hours per week compared to fathers exceeding 60 hours ($p < 0.05$).
 - Regional Variations: Semi-urban fathers reported slightly higher involvement (5.1 hours/week) than metropolitan counterparts (4.4 hours/week), suggesting localized community norms may influence practices.

Qualitative Themes

1. **Emotional Labor and Identity Transformation:**

- Many fathers described deep personal satisfaction from nurturing roles: “I never knew reading a bedtime story could make me feel so connected,” shared Rajesh, a 34-year-old delivery driver.
- Over time, repeated caregiving tasks—diaper changes, homework help—were internalized into fathers’ identities, challenging prior beliefs that “real men don’t cry or cuddle.”

2. **Economic Constraints and Time Poverty:**

- Fathers working rotating shifts, overtime, or multiple jobs reported missing key family moments—bedtime routines, school plays, medical visits. Sunil, employed in a chemical plant, noted, “I see my daughter more on weekends, and even then, only if I’m not called into extra shifts.”

3. **Community and Kinship Supports:**

- Extended family members (grandparents, aunts) often provided childcare backup, enabling fathers to attend occasional events. However, reliance on kin sometimes delayed fathers’ development of caregiving skills, creating ambivalence: “My mother-in-law watches the baby when I’m away—but I feel I haven’t learned what I could.”

4. **Negotiating Masculine Norms and Peer Influence:**

- Participation in local fathers’ groups and parenting workshops offered safe spaces to practice caregiving and share challenges. Peer recognition—compliments from neighbors when fathers carried infants or

cooked meals—bolstered confidence and eased social stigma.

5. **Aspirations for Future Generations:**

- Fathers expressed hopes that their more engaged parenting would normalize shared caregiving for their sons and daughters, breaking cycles of rigid gender roles. As one participant put it, “My son will never think that only mothers do housework.”

Integrated Insights

The quantitative uptick in paternal involvement corresponds with qualitative accounts of both desire and constraint: while fathers increasingly value and pursue caregiving, structural barriers—work hours, economic precarity, and cultural stigmas—temper the extent of their participation. Community supports and evolving masculine norms provide important facilitators but require reinforcement through policy and workplace reforms.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that fatherhood roles in working-class families are undergoing meaningful transformation, shaped by intersecting economic, cultural, and policy forces.

Key conclusions include:

- **Gradual Increase in Paternal Engagement:** National survey data confirm that working-class fathers are dedicating more time to childcare and domestic tasks, particularly when mothers participate in the workforce or fathers’ own work hours allow flexibility.
- **Emotional Rewards and Identity Shifts:** Qualitative findings illustrate how hands-on caregiving fosters deeper emotional bonds and reconfigures paternal identities, affirming the intrinsic value fathers place on nurturing roles.
- **Persistent Structural Constraints:** Work schedules, lack of paid leave, and enduring

masculine norms continue to impede fathers' ability to translate aspirations into sustained caregiving practices.

- **Role of Community Supports:** Fathers' groups, kinship networks, and positive peer feedback emerge as critical enablers of expanded fatherhood, though they cannot fully substitute for systemic reforms.

To bridge the gap between aspiration and practice, this research supports the following recommendations:

1. **Policy Interventions:** Instituting universal paid paternity leave, including coverage for informal and contract workers, would provide fathers with guaranteed time for early caregiving without income loss.
2. **Workplace Flexibility:** Incentivizing employers—especially in the manufacturing and service sectors—to offer shift swaps, flexible hours, and part-time options can ameliorate time poverty. On-site childcare facilities or childcare stipends would further reduce logistical burdens.
3. **Community-Based Programs:** Scaling up fatherhood workshops, peer-mentoring networks, and father-inclusive school and healthcare initiatives in working-class neighborhoods can reinforce new fatherhood norms, provide practical skills, and reduce stigma.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Media and local campaigns that portray positive father involvement in relatable, working-class settings can reshape cultural expectations and validate diverse expressions of masculinity.

By acting on these recommendations, policymakers, employers, and community leaders can support working-class fathers in their transition toward more equitable parenting roles, yielding benefits that extend to children's development, gender relations, and societal resilience.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The evolution of fatherhood roles in working-class families carries wide-ranging implications:

- **Child Development:** Active paternal engagement—reading, play, emotional coaching—contributes to children's language acquisition, socio-emotional competence, and academic readiness. Early involvement by fathers has been linked to lower behavioral problems and enhanced resilience in adverse circumstances.
- **Gender Equity and Family Well-Being:** When fathers share domestic and caregiving duties, households report higher marital satisfaction, reduced conflict, and more equitable power dynamics. Children exposed to egalitarian parenting internalize flexible gender roles, fostering more inclusive attitudes across generations.
- **Economic Stability and Mobility:** Dual caregiving and earning roles enable families to better balance work and home responsibilities. Mothers gain greater freedom to pursue career advancement, while fathers' involvement can reduce stress-related absenteeism. Over time, these dynamics support sustained economic mobility and reduce vulnerability to poverty cycles.
- **Community Cohesion:** Inclusive school and neighborhood events—welcoming fathers as active participants—strengthen social bonds. Peer networks of engaged fathers become informal support systems, fostering knowledge exchange on parenting strategies, child health, and education.
- **Policy and Cultural Shifts:** By recognizing working-class fathers as active caregivers, policymakers signal a departure from one-dimensional provider models. This cultural shift can catalyze broader transformations in labor laws,

employer practices, and societal attitudes toward gender and family.

In sum, empowering working-class fathers to embrace nurturing roles is both an equity imperative and a catalyst for healthier, more resilient families and communities. Supporting this transition through policy, workplace innovation, and grassroots programming represents a strategic investment in the well-being of children, the advancement of gender justice, and the socio-economic development of society at large.

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