



# DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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## ***DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH***

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### *Descriptive Finding*

## **How do fathers and mothers allocate their leisure time? Patterns and inequalities across 13 European countries**

**Anna Martinez Mendiola**

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## **How do fathers and mothers allocate their leisure time? Patterns and inequalities across 13 European countries**

**Anna Martinez Mendiola<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Spending time on leisure is widely recognised as a significant source of enjoyable psychological experiences in daily life. However, cross-national studies on time use and gender inequalities frequently overlook the study of leisure.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

This study has two principal objectives. First, it presents estimates of leisure time among parents, providing detailed insights into how fathers and mothers allocate their leisure time. Second, it explores patterns and variations in leisure time allocation and gender inequalities across European countries.

#### **METHODS**

This study uses data from the second round of the Harmonised European Time Use Survey (HETUS) to analyse leisure time among parents ( $n = 76,867$ ) across 13 European countries. This research focuses on parents because of their limited opportunities for leisure. The study examines seven dimensions that consider the type of activity and the presence of other family members.

#### **RESULTS**

Analogous patterns of leisure time allocation and gender inequalities exist across Europe. Fathers and mothers spend the majority of their leisure time on sedentary activities, either alone or with other adults. However, mothers spend less leisure time overall, particularly in sedentary activities, and more leisure time with their children.

#### **CONTRIBUTION**

This note provides new insights into how European parents spend their leisure time, highlighting cross-country patterns in time allocation and gender inequalities via time-use data from 13 European countries. It also emphasises the importance of considering different dimensions of leisure time for a more comprehensive understanding.

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## **1. Theoretical background**

Time-use studies have consistently demonstrated a gender convergence in the time men and women devote to paid and unpaid work over recent decades. Women's increasing participation in the labour market has occurred alongside a decline in housework time and a narrowing of gender gaps (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Bianchi et al. 2012; Sayer 2016). However, entrenched gender norms continue to shape the division of labour, particularly among parents of young children. Despite progress towards gender equality, traditional expectations still position mothers as primary caregivers and household managers, reinforcing an unequal distribution of unpaid work (Anxo et al. 2011; Craig and Mullan 2010). Consequently, mothers are primarily responsible for household and family life, leading to heavier workloads and longer total working hours when both paid and unpaid labour are considered (Kan et al. 2022).

Research has revealed that gender disparities in time allocation extend beyond work to leisure. Studies have shown that while parenthood reduces leisure time for both men and women, it exacerbates gender differences (Cantwell and Sanik 1993; Claxton and Perry-Jenkins 2008; Martinez and Cortina 2024). Partnered mothers in heterosexual couples not only have fewer opportunities to engage in leisure activities than their male partners do (Cantwell and Sanik 1993) but also experience lower-quality leisure time (Craig and Mullan 2013; Mattingly and Bianchi 2003; Sayer 2016). The extent of this disparity varies across countries and is shaped by institutional parental support (Daly 2013) and cultural gender norms (Kan et al. 2022). Building on this literature, this study analyses a broad set of European countries to provide the latest estimates of leisure time allocation and uncover patterns of gender inequality across Europe.

This paper uses data from the Harmonised European Time Use Survey (HETUS) to provide recent estimates of leisure time across 13 European countries using time-use diary surveys, which are widely regarded as the gold standard in time-use research (Cornwell, Gershuny, and Sullivan 2019; Sullivan 2021). In addition to quantifying total leisure, this paper explores the type of activity and the presence of other family members during leisure. Considering these dimensions of leisure is crucial, as they affect the potential psychological and physical benefits leisure provides (Mannell 2007). While mental and physical leisure activities promote overall health (Iwasaki 2006), social leisure fosters social integration and increases self-esteem (Lloyd and Auld 2002). In contrast, while sedentary leisure can provide relief from work and family-related stress (Iwasaki 2006; Lloyd and Auld 2002; Trenberth 2005), excessive engagement has been associated with apathy and depression (Hamer and Stamatakis 2014). Additionally, while family leisure enhances parents' well-being and strengthens family bonds (Craig and Mullan 2010; Flood, Meier, and Musick 2019; Vagni 2021), leisure time spent only with children often overlaps with childcare responsibilities, which may render it less gratifying

(Daly 2013; Vagni 2021). Parenting responsibilities affect some leisure activities more than others do, and persistent gender and parenting norms further restrict mothers' leisure time (Miller and Brown 2005; Knoester and Eggebeen 2006; Shaw 2008).

Cross-national research links variations in housework, childcare, and gender gaps to institutional and cultural differences (Esping-Andersen 2009). These studies suggest that work–family conciliation policies designed to alleviate pressures on families and encourage the involvement of men in care promote more egalitarian distributions of paid and unpaid work (Grunow and Evertsson 2016; Lewis 2009). However, comparative research on leisure time and gender inequalities remains limited. Reporting parental leisure time across European countries is essential to pave the way for novel research on parental well-being and reducing gender inequalities in leisure time.

## **2. Data and methods**

This study uses data from the second round of HETUS, which includes information from 17 European Union countries collected between 2008 and 2015. HETUS constitutes a comprehensive database of national time-use surveys offering harmonised data on various activities, along with individual, household, and contextual measures that facilitate European comparative analysis. The final sample includes 32,169 diaries from fathers and 44,698 diaries from mothers living with a partner and one or more children under the age of 18 across 13 European countries: Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Observations from Austria, Hungary, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands were excluded because of inconsistent or missing information regarding 'with whom' the main activity was performed.

This research focuses on parents, given their limited leisure opportunities (Craig, Brown, and Jun 2020; Martinez and Cortina 2024; Ruppanner et al. 2019). The study analyses time-use data by considering all leisure activities recorded in HETUS and categorising them into seven dimensions on the basis of the type of activity and the presence of other family members. These dimensions include the following (HETUS codes in parentheses): (1) total leisure time; (2) sedentary leisure: relaxation (53), watching television or listening to the radio (82, 83), and computing and gaming (72, 73); (3) physically and mentally active leisure: sports and exercise, including walking, hiking, running, cycling, fitness, ball games, and other sports (61, 62, 63), art and hobbies (71), and reading (81); (4) social leisure: social life, including socialising with family, visiting and receiving, and celebrations and communication (51), and entertainment and culture, including cinema, theatre and concerts, exhibitions, museums, and live sports events (52); (5) adult leisure: time spent alone or with other adults, either away from the household

or not (which may or may not include the spouse and one or more children older than 9 years); (6) family leisure: time spent with both the spouse and children up to 9 years old; and (7) child(ren) leisure: time spent with children up to 9 years old while the spouse is absent. The classification of leisure activities by type builds upon categorisations employed in prior research (e.g., Passias, Sayer, and Pepin 2017). The ‘with whom’ variable is incorporated to account for the presence of other family members during these activities, aiming to assess the extent to which leisure time may be intertwined with childcare. HETUS also collects information on secondary activities. Previous studies have examined gender differences in ‘contaminated leisure’ – leisure time overlapping with housework or childcare – using simultaneous activities (e.g., Bittman and Wajcman 2000; Mattingly and Bianchi 2003). Owing to data limitations, this study focuses solely on primary activities, where child copresence is likely to reflect childcare involvement.

Leisure patterns are analysed via descriptive statistics and multivariable models. Countries are ranked according to the total leisure time reported by fathers. Figures display estimated leisure time for fathers and mothers and highlight gender differences across countries. The predicted values are obtained through a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with clustered standard errors, as some samples include time-use diaries from both partners. The analysis controls for several individual characteristics in interaction with gender, including respondent age, age of the youngest child, number of children aged 0 to 6 years, number of children aged 7 to 17 years, education level, and employment status. Individual and diary weights were applied to adjust for population characteristics and the day of the week that the diary was recorded.

### **3. Results**

Table 1 reports the average minutes of leisure time for fathers and mothers across 13 European countries, detailing the time spent on specific activities. Figure 1 shows the predicted mean of total leisure time, Figure 2 shows the predicted mean by type of activity, and Figure 3 displays the predicted mean by the presence of other family members. The results reveal substantial variation between and within countries regarding the amount of leisure time available to fathers and mothers. However, similar time-use patterns are also evident.

**Table 1: Descriptive of leisure time by gender and country**

	Fathers	Greece	Belgium	Serbia	Finland	Estonia	Germany	Italy	UK	Norway	Poland	France	Romania	Spain	Average
<b>Leisure</b>		<b>5:25</b>	<b>5:07</b>	<b>5:00</b>	<b>4:57</b>	<b>4:51</b>	<b>4:39</b>	<b>4:40</b>	<b>4:39</b>	<b>4:38</b>	<b>4:30</b>	<b>4:22</b>	<b>4:20</b>	<b>4:01</b>	<b>4:42</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>3:44</b>	<b>3:17</b>	<b>3:29</b>	<b>3:06</b>	<b>3:28</b>	<b>2:44</b>	<b>2:51</b>	<b>3:14</b>	<b>2:26</b>	<b>3:13</b>	<b>2:54</b>	<b>3:21</b>	<b>2:37</b>	<b>3:06</b>
<b>Type of activity</b>		<b>0:24</b>	<b>0:23</b>	<b>0:26</b>	<b>0:15</b>	<b>0:17</b>	<b>0:17</b>	<b>0:34</b>	<b>0:21</b>	<b>0:08</b>	<b>0:19</b>	<b>0:23</b>	<b>0:32</b>	<b>0:13</b>	<b>0:20</b>
	Relaxation	2:39	2:26	2:47	2:18	2:29	1:55	2:03	2:29	1:56	2:25	2:05	2:37	2:07	2:19
	Media and radio	0:41	0:28	0:16	0:33	0:42	0:32	0:14	0:24	0:22	0:29	0:26	0:12	0:17	0:25
	Computer and gaming	<b>0:41</b>	<b>0:37</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:58</b>	<b>0:42</b>	<b>0:47</b>	<b>0:55</b>	<b>0:31</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:42</b>	<b>0:24</b>	<b>0:47</b>	<b>0:42</b>
<b>Active</b>		<b>0:26</b>	<b>0:22</b>	<b>0:21</b>	<b>0:30</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:25</b>	<b>0:37</b>	<b>0:20</b>	<b>0:31</b>	<b>0:23</b>	<b>0:30</b>	<b>0:13</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:26</b>
	Sport and exercise	0:02	0:05	0:01	0:03	0:02	0:04	0:02	0:03	0:03	0:02	0:03	0:00	0:02	0:02
	Art and hobbies	0:13	0:10	0:13	0:25	0:13	0:18	0:16	0:08	0:20	0:10	0:09	0:11	0:10	0:13
	Reading	<b>1:00</b>	<b>1:13</b>	<b>0:55</b>	<b>0:53</b>	<b>0:41</b>	<b>1:08</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>1:18</b>	<b>0:42</b>	<b>0:46</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:37</b>	<b>0:53</b>
	Social	0:05	0:12	0:01	0:05	0:05	0:14	0:04	0:10	0:06	0:02	0:04	0:02	0:04	0:05
	Social life	0:55	1:01	0:54	0:49	0:36	0:54	0:50	0:44	1:12	0:40	0:42	0:33	0:33	0:47
	Cultural events	<b>3:30</b>	<b>4:03</b>	<b>3:50</b>	<b>4:07</b>	<b>3:38</b>	<b>3:51</b>	<b>3:10</b>	<b>3:30</b>	<b>3:45</b>	<b>3:25</b>	<b>2:51</b>	<b>3:21</b>	<b>2:42</b>	<b>3:33</b>
<b>Presence of others</b>	<b>Adult(s)</b>	<b>1:45</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>0:58</b>	<b>0:33</b>	<b>1:00</b>	<b>0:38</b>	<b>1:14</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>0:39</b>	<b>0:52</b>	<b>1:06</b>	<b>0:47</b>	<b>1:05</b>	<b>0:57</b>
	Family	<b>0:10</b>	<b>0:10</b>	<b>0:11</b>	<b>0:17</b>	<b>0:13</b>	<b>0:10</b>	<b>0:15</b>	<b>0:15</b>	<b>0:14</b>	<b>0:12</b>	<b>0:25</b>	<b>0:11</b>	<b>0:14</b>	<b>0:13</b>
	Child(ren)														
<b>Mothers</b>															
<b>Leisure</b>		<b>3:57</b>	<b>4:18</b>	<b>3:45</b>	<b>4:08</b>	<b>3:53</b>	<b>4:22</b>	<b>3:24</b>	<b>4:04</b>	<b>4:33</b>	<b>3:37</b>	<b>3:50</b>	<b>3:14</b>	<b>3:20</b>	<b>3:52</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>2:37</b>	<b>2:33</b>	<b>2:27</b>	<b>2:06</b>	<b>2:25</b>	<b>2:18</b>	<b>1:56</b>	<b>2:30</b>	<b>2:07</b>	<b>2:19</b>	<b>2:20</b>	<b>2:24</b>	<b>2:02</b>	<b>2:18</b>
<b>Type of activity</b>		<b>0:22</b>	<b>0:22</b>	<b>0:23</b>	<b>0:10</b>	<b>0:15</b>	<b>0:20</b>	<b>0:31</b>	<b>0:21</b>	<b>0:12</b>	<b>0:15</b>	<b>0:23</b>	<b>0:28</b>	<b>0:12</b>	<b>0:19</b>
	Sedentary	1:58	1:55	1:57	1:39	1:47	1:37	1:20	1:55	1:39	1:51	1:41	1:52	1:42	1:45
	Relaxation	0:17	0:16	0:07	0:17	0:23	0:21	0:05	0:14	0:16	0:13	0:16	0:04	0:08	0:13
	Media and radio	<b>0:26</b>	<b>0:29</b>	<b>0:31</b>	<b>1:00</b>	<b>0:36</b>	<b>0:51</b>	<b>0:40</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:57</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:36</b>	<b>0:18</b>	<b>0:41</b>	<b>0:37</b>
	Computer and gaming	0:16	0:14	0:19	0:23	0:18	0:23	0:27	0:14	0:29	0:19	0:21	0:12	0:28	0:20
	Active	0:09	0:05	0:01	0:03	0:01	0:04	0:01	0:02	0:02	0:01	0:04	0:01	0:02	0:02
	Sport and exercise	0:09	0:10	0:11	0:34	0:17	0:24	0:12	0:11	0:26	0:15	0:11	0:05	0:11	0:15
	Art and hobbies	<b>0:54</b>	<b>1:16</b>	<b>0:47</b>	<b>1:02</b>	<b>0:52</b>	<b>1:13</b>	<b>0:48</b>	<b>1:07</b>	<b>1:29</b>	<b>0:43</b>	<b>0:54</b>	<b>0:32</b>	<b>0:37</b>	<b>0:56</b>
	Reading	0:04	0:09	0:01	0:06	0:07	0:14	0:03	0:12	0:08	0:03	0:04	0:02	0:04	0:05
	Social	0:50	1:07	0:46	0:56	0:43	0:59	0:45	0:55	1:21	0:40	0:50	0:30	0:33	0:50
	Social life	<b>2:26</b>	<b>3:10</b>	<b>2:48</b>	<b>3:11</b>	<b>2:38</b>	<b>3:25</b>	<b>2:09</b>	<b>2:54</b>	<b>2:40</b>	<b>2:38</b>	<b>2:15</b>	<b>2:21</b>	<b>2:11</b>	<b>2:45</b>
	Cultural events	<b>1:05</b>	<b>0:43</b>	<b>0:35</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:36</b>	<b>0:29</b>	<b>0:49</b>	<b>0:36</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:37</b>	<b>0:46</b>	<b>0:34</b>	<b>0:42</b>	<b>0:38</b>
<b>Presence of others</b>	<b>Adult(s)</b>	<b>0:26</b>	<b>0:25</b>	<b>0:22</b>	<b>0:29</b>	<b>0:38</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:26</b>	<b>0:33</b>	<b>0:25</b>	<b>0:22</b>	<b>0:50</b>	<b>0:18</b>	<b>0:27</b>	<b>0:28</b>
	Family														
	Child(ren)														

Note: Leisure time is presented in hours:minutes.

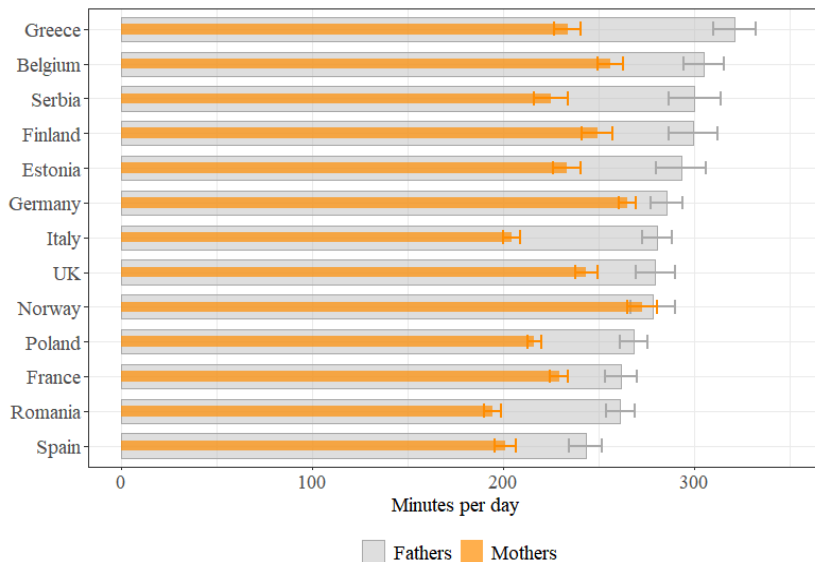
### **3.1 Total leisure time and type of activity**

On average, European fathers spend 4 hours and 42 minutes per day on leisure, although there are notable country differences. Fathers in Greece, Belgium, and Serbia engage in leisure for approximately one hour more per day (about 5 hours) than those in France, Romania, and Spain do. Sedentary activities, primarily media consumption, dominate European fathers' leisure (averaging 3 hours and 6 minutes per day). This is followed by social leisure, which varies from 35 minutes in Romania to 1 hour and 18 minutes in Norway. Only in Finland, Estonia, and Spain do fathers allocate more time to active leisure than to social leisure.

European mothers, on average, spend 3 hours and 52 minutes on leisure. The highest levels of leisure time among mothers are found in Norway, Germany, Belgium, and Finland, while the lowest are observed in Romania and Spain. Mothers' time-use patterns resemble those of fathers, with a large share devoted to sedentary leisure (from 2 hours and 37 minutes in Greece to 1 hour and 56 minutes in Italy). Social and active leisure follow in time. Compared with their counterparts in other European countries, Norwegian mothers spend more time on both active and social leisure.

Figure 1 illustrates cross-national patterns and variations in the predicted leisure time, confirming that mothers have consistently less leisure time than fathers do (except in Norway). However, the gender gap is more pronounced in Greece, Italy, and Serbia and almost nonexistent in Norway.

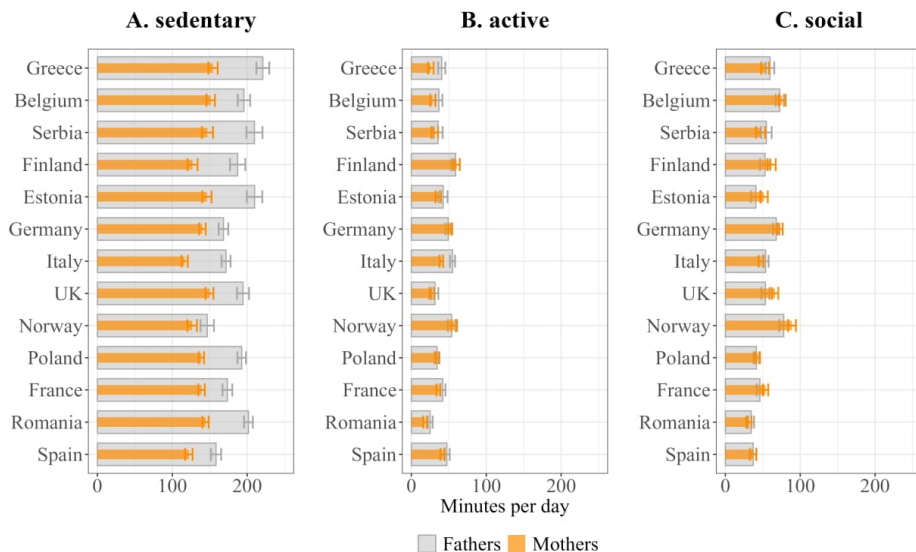


**Figure 1: Predicted leisure time for fathers and mothers by country**

Note: Predicted values from OLS models controlling by respondents' age, age of the youngest children, number of children age 0–6, number of children age 7–17, education level, and employment status (95% confidence intervals).

Figure 2 presents the predicted leisure time of fathers and mothers across the types of activities. The figure emphasises that gender disparities in leisure primarily stem from differences in sedentary activities while revealing more comparable time allocations on active and social leisure. In several countries, such as Finland, Estonia, Germany, Norway, and France, mothers spend slightly more time on social leisure than fathers do. These findings illustrate a pattern of gender inequality in leisure time across Europe, as the gender gap in leisure time arises mainly by mothers spending less time on sedentary activities such as media consumption, computing, and relaxation.

**Figure 2: Predicted leisure time for fathers and mothers by type of activity**



Note: Predicted values from OLS models controlling by respondents' age, age of the youngest children, number of children age 0–6, number of children age 7–17, education level, and employment status (95% confidence intervals).

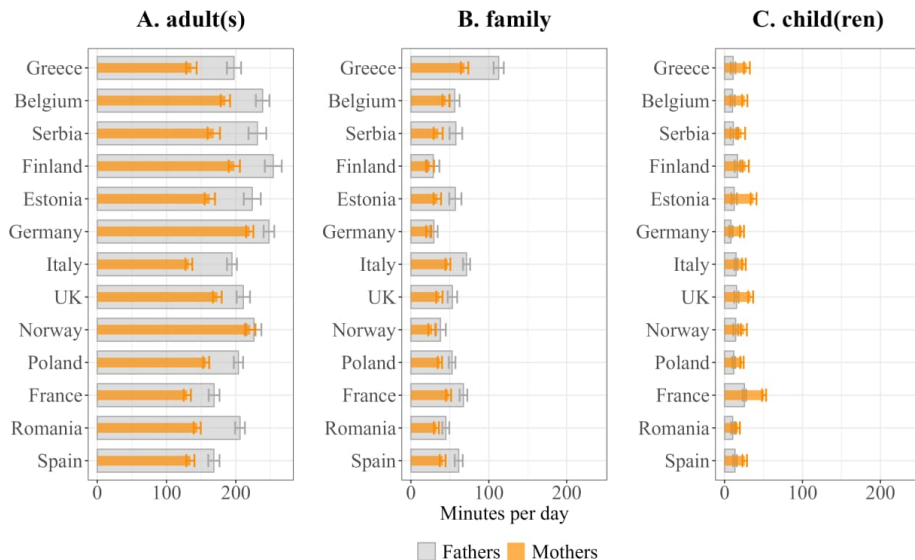
### 3.2 Leisure time according to the presence of other family members

Considering whether leisure occurs as adult time, with family members, or with children is crucial to assessing its qualitative nature (Vagni 2021). The presence of children can limit leisure opportunities, as children's supervision may be needed, and certain activities may be constrained (Shaw 2008). However, the copresence of a partner may mitigate these negative effects. Family leisure time includes shared leisure time with children and their partner, but can also capture cases where the partner simultaneously carries out other activities.

Figure 3 shows that both fathers and mothers principally engage in leisure as adult-oriented time. However, fathers enjoy more adult leisure than mothers do (except in Norway), reinforcing a gendered pattern of inequality. Additionally, fathers reported more family leisure, indicating that while mothers may be present during fathers' leisure activity, mothers might simultaneously be engaged in other domestic or childcare tasks. In contrast, mothers spend significantly more of their leisure time solely with children

(around 27 minutes), which may suggest a deficiency in the quality of their leisure time (Bittman and Wajcman 2000; Craig and Mullan 2013; Shaw 2008).

**Figure 3: Predicted leisure time for fathers and mothers by presence of other(s)**



*Note:* Predicted values from OLS models controlling by respondents' age, age of the youngest children, number of children age 0–6, number of children age 7–17, education level, and employment status (95% confidence intervals).

## 4. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how fathers and mothers allocate their leisure time across 13 European countries, uncovering consistent patterns of gender inequalities. Despite cross-national variations in the total amount of leisure time enjoyed by fathers and mothers, fathers consistently have more leisure time than mothers, whereas mothers spend more of their leisure time with children. This aligns with prior research showing that mothers experience greater time poverty and lower-quality leisure time (Mattingly and Bianchi 2003; Milkie, Raley, and Bianchi 2009). Mothers not only have less total leisure time but also integrate a greater portion of it with childcare. Some research has suggested that leisure time spent alone with children does not necessarily diminish the well-being benefits of engaging in leisure activities (Flood, Meier, and

Musick 2019); however, it may render this leisure time less restorative and autonomous (Craig and Mullan 2013; Shaw 2008).

The findings also emphasise that gender disparities in leisure time are driven primarily by differences in sedentary activities, such as media consumption and relaxation, where fathers consistently engage more than mothers do. In contrast, gender differences in social and active leisure are less pronounced, and in some instances, mothers even exceed fathers. This is particularly relevant, as different types of leisure provide distinct benefits: While social and active leisure contribute to well-being, reduced time for sedentary leisure may limit opportunities for mothers to cope with work and family-related stress (Iwasaki 2006; Lloyd and Auld 2002; Trenberth 2005). However, both fathers and mothers allocate the largest proportion of their leisure time to media consumption. The difficulty of reconciling work, family, and leisure demands may partly explain the predominance of this lower-quality leisure experience among European parents.

Importantly, the magnitude of these gender differences varies across countries, indicating the influence of institutional and cultural factors (Gornick and Meyers 2009; Esping-Andersen 2009). In Norway, where family policies are more egalitarian and fathers are more engaged in childcare, the gender gap in leisure time is minimal. In contrast, in southern and eastern European countries, where traditional gender norms persist, mothers' leisure is particularly constrained despite fathers enjoying greater leisure time. These findings align with research showing that work–family reconciliation policies and cultural attitudes towards gender roles shape mothers' total workload, including paid and unpaid commitments (Kan et al. 2022), affecting their time available for leisure.

This study contributes to the literature by moving beyond simple measures of time, incorporating dimensions such as activity types and the presence of family members. It sheds light on how gender norms and parental responsibilities intersect to shape leisure opportunities. The findings reaffirm that gender inequalities in leisure are deeply embedded in broader societal structures, reinforcing the notion that mothers continue to bear the brunt of time constraints even as gender roles evolve.

Future research should explore the mechanisms behind these disparities, particularly how parental leave policies, childcare availability, and broader social norms influence gender differences in leisure. Qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into how parents perceive and experience their leisure time, particularly regarding its emotional and psychological dimensions.

Addressing gender disparities in leisure time is important for personal well-being and reflects broader gender inequalities in work and family life. Policies that promote greater paternal involvement in caregiving and ensure equitable access to leisure opportunities could help mitigate these disparities, fostering both gender equality and

improved parental well-being across Europe (Haas and Hwang 2008; Hegewisch and Gornick 2011).

## **5. Acknowledgements**

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