



Anticipating the Division of Labour during the Transition To Coparenthood: A cross-national Qualitative Study

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Received: 1 August 2023 / Accepted: 3 February 2026
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Abstract

The transition to coparenthood begins even before the birth of the first child and involves developing expectations and meanings that can shape the initiation into parenthood. One crucial aspect of this transition is the anticipated division of labor and childcare between partners. The present study aimed to examine how expectant parents envision sharing caregiving, domestic, and paid labor responsibilities. Using a cross-national qualitative design, we identified and compared factors that might facilitate or hinder egalitarian divisions during the transition to parenthood. As part of an international consortium, we analyzed a total of 180 individual semi-structured interviews with people expecting their first child, 30 mothers-to-be and 30 fathers-to-be in each of three countries: Portugal, Finland, and Japan. We analyzed the interviews using an iterative, reflexive thematic analysis that accounted for both cross-country similarities and differences. Five main influences emerged in shaping the expected division of labor and childcare: personal characteristics, gender role attitudes, perceptions of fairness, extended family support, and work-care arrangements (including parental leave). Participants across all three countries generally voiced support for gender equality; however, cultural norms and policy contexts led many to anticipate temporarily gendered divisions (especially mothers as primary caregivers) following the birth, particularly in Japan and, to a lesser extent in Portugal. Overall, the findings highlight how personal, contextual, and societal factors jointly inform couples' expectations for sharing responsibilities as they enter parenthood.

Highlights

- Expectant parents recognise that personal traits (health, preferences, complementarity) shape parental roles across countries.
- Found discrepancies between expressed and implicit expectations. Expressed preferences reflect gender roles and societal norms.
- Finnish parents openly emphasize gender equality as the foundation for task division in their future roles.
- Portuguese and Japanese parents express a desire for gender equality but often retain traditional expectations.
- Contextual factors like extended family support and work conditions are strongly emphasized by expectant parents.

Keywords Coparenting · Transition · Division of labour · Childcare · Thematic analysis

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The transition to parenthood is a significant life event that requires substantial adaptation, often leading to a reorganization of roles and responsibilities within and outside the family unit (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Sevón, 2012). Prospective parents develop expectations about their future roles in parenting and coparenting, which set the foundation for the coparental relationship (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017; Le et al., 2016; McHale et al., 2004; Van Egeren, 2004). These expectations set the tone for the development and maintenance of the new coparenting relationship (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017; Le et al., 2016; McHale et al., 2004; Van Egeren, 2004) and have been shown to predict unique variance in postpartum representations of coparenting (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017), and postpartum coparenting behaviours, even in the long term (Lawrence et al., 2008). Thus, it can be said that the coparental relationship already starts to emerge in the preparation and transition towards parenthood.

According to Feinberg (2003), coparenting is defined by the joint involvement of both parents in child rearing with a focus on the inter-parental interactions associated with the parental role. The construct of coparenting includes: (a) childrearing agreement, (b) the extent to which parents engage in supportive vs. undermining parenting behaviour, (c) joint family management, and (d) the division of childcare and labour (Feinberg, 2003). The division of childcare and labour, central to the present study, does not necessarily imply an equal sharing of daily responsibilities. Rather, it highlights the importance of a perceived fair and mutually adjusted arrangement, as defined by each family's unique perspective, in promoting positive outcomes (Carriero, 2011; Khazan, 2008).

Expectations regarding how soon-to-be parents will divide domestic, professional, and childcare responsibilities are particularly relevant during the transition to parenthood, as these expectations can significantly influence the quality of the coparenting relationship (Van Egeren, 2004; Newkirk et al., 2016), the dynamics of coparenting itself (Petts et al., 2021), and child adjustment (Feinberg, 2003; Feinberg et al., 2010). The division of domestic, caregiving, and professional labour between parents has been widely explored in the context of work-family reconciliation, gender roles, and, more recently, coparenting (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2019; Sevón, 2012; Le et al., 2016). However, while several studies have examined parental role division after childbirth, fewer have explored how first-time parents construct these expectations *before* the child's birth (Cowan & Cowan, 2000), and there is a notable lack of qualitative, cross-national research capturing how cultural and policy contexts shape these anticipations (Wall & Escobedo, 2009). The present study addresses this gap by qualitatively exploring how expectant parents in Portugal, Finland, and Japan anticipate the division of responsibilities, and by identifying the personal,

relational, and sociocultural factors that shape their visions of equitable caregiving and labour sharing.

Personal, Contextual, and Gender Role Influences

Understanding how parents anticipate and experience this division requires a robust theoretical framework that accounts for personal influences, contextual influences, and gender role attitudes, three key constructs that shape anticipatory beliefs and behaviours. Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) offers an integrative framework that encompasses these levels of influence. This theory posits that gendered behaviors and expectations arise largely from the distribution of women and men into societal roles; as a result, individual dispositions, structural constraints, and cultural gender norms are intertwined in shaping how new parents envision their future division of labour.

At the individual level, research suggests that biological essentialism, individual psychological factors, and personal preferences play a crucial role in shaping expectations about caregiving and professional responsibilities (Pinho & Gaunt, 2021; Petts et al., 2021; Zimmermann & LeGoff, 2020). While cultural expectations strongly influence caregiving roles, studies indicate that personal values, attachment styles, and psychological predispositions also affect how parents divide labor (Kochanska et al., 2001). Additionally, some research suggests that biological and hormonal factors may contribute to early caregiving preferences, particularly in infancy (Edelstein, 2017; Feldman, 2012). These individual influences interact with broader societal conditions, shaping parents' actual caregiving behaviors.

Beyond individual preferences, structural and policy-driven factors play a crucial role in shaping caregiving decisions. Work-family reconciliation policies, paid parental leave provisions, childcare accessibility, workplace flexibility, and broader employment conditions can significantly influence how parents distribute labour (Persson & Rossin-Slater, 2019; Tornello, 2015). Research suggests that family-friendly policies lead to more egalitarian labour division preferences, although gender disparities often persist, particularly when workplace expectations or cultural norms reinforce traditional caregiving roles (Bünning & Hipp, 2022). Parental leave uptake, for instance, remains gendered in many societies, with fathers often facing greater structural constraints in taking extended leave (Twamley, 2023). These trends highlight the notion that while supportive policies expand opportunities for equitable caregiving, they do not necessarily translate into equal uptake, as social expectations and professional demands continue to shape parental choices. Additionally, gender norms function as

both personal and contextual influences, shaped by broader societal expectations and reinforced through workplace and family structures that dictate caregiving responsibilities. Besides, expectations and institutional constraints can indirectly limit perceived personal preferences, which are constrained by perceptions of what is feasible, financial resources, regulations, leave structure, and childcare availability.

Taking a closer look at these contextual influences, a cross-national perspective allows us to explore how gender roles, cultural norms, and policies interact to shape the division of labour in different societal contexts. Cultural norms, values, and expectations concerning gender roles, workforce participation, and family policies vary across societies, affecting how individuals plan for parenthood (Aoki, 2009; Han et al., 2023; Katz-Wise et al., 2010). The negotiation of childcare tasks during the transition to parenthood differs depending on the cultural context. For instance, Yu and Kuo (2018) found that, contrary to studies conducted in Western societies, women in Japan tend to become less supportive of traditional gender roles as their number of children increases, even though the actual distribution of domestic and childcare responsibilities remains gendered. In the European context, studies suggest that Western countries tend to have a more gender-equal distribution of housework than Eastern countries, despite the latter having higher female workforce participation (Lozano & García-Román,

2022). A general modernisation trend supports increased male participation in household tasks and childcare; however, this varies by country and is often accompanied by persistent ideas about motherhood and femininity, making women's entry into traditionally male-dominated breadwinning roles less accepted (García-Román & Ophir, 2024).

Cross-national studies are essential for understanding how cultural contexts shape the division of labour during the transition to parenthood. These analyses help identify differences in labour division and highlight the factors contributing to these variations. Cultural traditions, values, and social policies can influence parents' ideals of care, gender relations, and actual caregiving behaviours (Fraser, 1994; Kremer, 2007; Walby, 2020). These influences begin long before children are born, as gender expectations shape parental roles from the outset (Bornstein, 2012; Eerola & Mykkänen, 2015). Given the importance of cultural norms, gender ideologies, work-family reconciliation policies, and employment demands in this process, we take a cross-national perspective to explore these dynamics in three distinct societies: Finland, Japan, and Portugal. The following section provides an overview of these national contexts. For a summary of country differences in regard to different social welfare systems, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1 Characterisation of the participating countries (as of September 2021)

Welfare State ¹	Finland	Japan	Portugal
	Social Democratic (Nordic universal welfare state)	Conservative (familialism)	Conservative (familialism) “micro-solidarity”
Gender Equality	European integration Promotion of gender equality	Weak gender equality movement	European integration Promotion of gender equality
Childcare Model ²	Egalitarian (Care-giving parity model)	Traditional (One-and-a half breadwinner model)	Transitional (Unsupported universal breadwinner/ adult-worker model)
Maternity Leave ³	17.5 weeks statutory, paid, partly obligatory	14 weeks statutory, paid, partly obligatory	30 days (paid, prenatal, optional), 6 weeks (paid, post-natal, obligatory)
Paternity Leave ⁴	3 weeks, statutory, paid	no statutory entitlement	20 business days, (paid, partly obligatory)
Parental Leave ⁵	8.2 months, statutory, paid, bonus leave for father -Additional childcare leave available	14 months, statutory, paid, bonus leave for father, -No additional childcare leave	7.4 months, statutory, paid, bonus leave for father, -Additional parental leave available
Annual hours worked (h) ⁶	1531	1598	1613
Women's employment rate (%) ⁷	70.6	71.1	66.4
Women's part time employment rate (less than 30 h/ week) ⁸	17.2	39.5	8.6
Attendance rates of formal ECEC 0–2 Years (%) /3–5 years(%) ⁹	31/80	30/91	37/97

¹ Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999); Ferrera (2005); Grunow and Evertsson (2016, 2019, 2021)

² Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014)

^{3, 4, 5} LPR. (2021)

⁶ OECD (2021a); ⁷ OECD (2021b); ⁸ OECD (2021c); ⁹ OECD (2020); Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014)

The Finnish Context

Finland has a long history of women's participation in the workforce, with historical, cultural, and economic factors behind it (Pfau-Effinger, 2004; Julkunen & Nätti, 1999). A key historical reason for the prevalence of dual-earning families is Finland's late urbanisation. In an agricultural society, men and women worked side by side, and both played a central role in the household economy. Julkunen and Nätti (1999, p. 48) explain that women joined paid employment as a result of economic necessity, historical continuity, and a culture that supported the individual role of women, including mothers as economic providers for the family. Women's employment rate continues to be high, standing at 78.1% among women and 78.3% of men in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). In addition, Finland has a well-developed social democratic welfare state (i.e., Nordic universal welfare state) that provides comprehensive social security benefits, including universal healthcare, parental leave, and child benefits, which help support families and promote social equality (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999). These policies extend to a comprehensive and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. In principle, publicly subsidised ECEC is available to all families. Finland has high attendance rates of ECEC among 3–5-year-olds, with 89% of children in this age group enrolled in publicly funded daycare centres in 2022. The corresponding figure for children 0–2 years old was 40% (ECEC Statistics Finland, 2025). At the time the data for this study was collected, parental leave in Finland included 17.5 weeks of statutory paid maternity leave, and 3 weeks of statutory paid paternity leave. Since then, parental leave in Finland has been renewed to be more equal. Under the new law, parental leave lasts for 320 working days (approximately 14 months) and is shared equally between both parents, in cases where the child has two parents (Kela, 2023). In addition, Finland has several measures to support working parents, such as child care and home care allowances that have low levels of compensation but secure a statutory right to work part-time until the child finishes 2nd grade (around 9 years old) (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2025). In 2023, the average net monthly earnings for a single worker in Finland were approximately €2,351, surpassing the EU average of €2217 (Eurostat, 2024). This financial stability, coupled with comprehensive parental leave policies and accessible childcare services, supports more egalitarian caregiving arrangements.

The Japanese Context

In Japan, the concept of “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai-kenbo*)—a cultural norm for femininity—has been prevalent since the 19th century (Shizuko & Sylvain, 1994). The term “housewifization” (*shufu-ka*) was used to refer to the process by which the role of Japanese women became attached to that of a full-time “professional” housewife (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2012). There remains a widespread perception in Japan that professional work and childcare are incompatible, contributing to women's withdrawal from the job market to take on caregiving responsibilities (Raymo & Lim, 2011). In 2023, the employment rate for women aged 15 and above was 53.6%, compared to 69.5% for men, with 41.9% of employed women working part time (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, n.d.). These patterns reflect broader structural dynamics in which men continue to assume the role of primary earners with demanding work schedules, while women adapt by taking responsibility for domestic and childcare tasks. Long working hours and gendered job structures, such as women's overrepresentation in part-time and non-regular positions, remain key barriers to work-life balance and women's career advancement, even as female labour force participation increases. Concurrently, Japanese women are becoming increasingly less supportive of a traditional gender division of labour. This apparent contradiction may reflect the influence of Japan's collectivist culture, which tends to foster greater tolerance for discrepancies between personal attitudes and outward behaviors (Sikka et al., 2010; Yu & Kuo, 2018). Japan follows a conservative, familistic welfare model that places primary caregiving responsibilities on families and offers limited state support. Gender roles remain traditional, with men typically seen as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers. Childcare is often provided by family members or informal networks, though formal childcare options exist and are widely used for children aged 3 to 5 (91% attendance). While parental leave is available until a child is 14 months old, fathers' uptake remains low (OECD, 2024; The Japan Times, 2024). As of 2025, the median monthly salary in Japan is around ¥471,000 (approximately €3,470), with notable gender disparities, women earn approximately 75.7% of what men earn. Additionally, a significant proportion of women are employed in part-time or non-regular positions, which may reinforce traditional caregiving expectations (Tokyo Portfolio, 2024, March 21).

The Portuguese Context

The status of women in Portugal can be traced back to the Carnation Revolution in 1974, the peaceful military coup that ended a nearly 50-year autocratic regime and established democracy in the country. The revolution brought significant changes in women's rights (e.g., the right to vote, access to certain professions, and the formal recognition of equality in the constitution). However, despite the formal recognition of women's rights, gender inequalities persist to this day (Neves & Nogueira, 2010). Portugal aligns with the Southern European model of "micro solidarity," characterized by strong family ties and informal support networks (Ferrera, 2005). It follows a conservative, familistic welfare model that places primary responsibility for care and support on families, with relatively limited state intervention (Kuronen, 2010). Rooted in traditional values and intergenerational obligations, this model assumes that families, particularly women, will care for children and the elderly. Childcare is frequently provided by relatives, especially grandparents, though formal childcare services are also available and increasingly used. Parental leave in Portugal allows parents to take up to 150–180 consecutive days of leave. Maternity leave guarantees mothers at least 6 weeks of statutory paid leave, while paid paternity leave is 20 business days. Long working hours are common in Portugal, which may pose additional challenges for parents concurrently managing family responsibilities. In terms of gender roles and expectations, Portugal has made progress in promoting gender equality, but disparities still exist, especially in the gendered division of domestic and childcare responsibilities, which fall more on women (Perista et al., 2016). Considering that Portugal has one of the highest rates of full-time employed women compared to other European countries, women may face additional challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. In 2023, the average net monthly earnings in Portugal were about €1412, below the EU average. Despite high female labor force participation, job insecurity and lower wages may influence caregiving expectations, potentially limiting the feasibility of egalitarian arrangements (EURES, 2023).

Based on the above descriptions of the different welfare states and predominant work-family arrangements in each country, we propose that the three countries could be described as follows: Finland is characterised by a tradition of gender equality with some residual familism, Japan reflects a more traditional gender role configuration, where women are often positioned as supplemental workers within a male-breadwinner framework, and Portugal, which has undergone rapid social change in recent decades, exhibits a coexisting familist/dual-worker dynamic. Each can be viewed as egalitarian (Finland), traditional (Japan), and

transitional (Portugal), with regard to child-rearing norms. For this reason, these three countries offer an opportunity to examine how gendered expectations around caregiving and labour division take shape in diverse sociocultural contexts. The present study investigates the anticipatory beliefs of expectant parents regarding the division of labour during the transition to parenthood, and the multi-level influences, including individual, contextual, and cultural gender role norms, that shape these expectations.

Method

The interview data was collected through the "COPAGloba: A longitudinal, cross-national study on the construction of coparenting in the transition to parenthood." The COPA-Globa project includes three countries: Finland, Japan and Portugal.

In all three countries, recruitment occurred via snowball sampling and through contacts with maternity health care clinics (both community and private), via Facebook groups for pregnant women or parenting, through university mailing lists, and through community associations and NGOs that assist families. In Japan, recruitment also involved advertisements in a daily newspaper and a smartphone application directed at pregnant women. In Finland, recruitment took place between April 2020 and January 2021; in Japan between August 2020 and February 2021; and in Portugal between September 2020 and June 2021.

The study consists of independent interviews with each expectant parent during the third trimester of pregnancy, and the completion of an online questionnaire after the interview with socio-demographic information. The interview guide was developed in English jointly by the three teams in order to achieve a shared understanding of the goals and meanings of each interview topic, while respecting cultural diversity and sensitivity. Thus, in addition to translating the English interview guide, each question was accompanied by a description of its intended goal to establish cross-cultural validity while acknowledging cultural nuances. After reaching consensus on the final version, each team translated the interview guide into their local language and conducted a pretest, after which minor adjustments were introduced. The interview guide covered a set of topics related to the anticipation of coparenting. For the present study, we used responses to questions in sections related to (a) the current division of labour and family responsibilities between the partners (e.g., "What is the work situation of you two?"; "How do you currently share home responsibilities with your partner?"), and (b) wishes and expectations concerning the division of tasks after the baby is born (e.g., "How would you like your collaboration to be?"; "How do you

Table 2 Socio-Demographic information of each country's participants

Age	Finland		Japan		Portugal	
	Expectant mothers (N=30)	Expectant fathers (N=30)	Expectant mothers (N=30)	Expectant fathers (N=30)	Expectant mothers (N=30)	Expectant fathers (N=30)
Lower than 28	26.7%	20.0%	3.3%	10.0%	23.3%	14.0%
28–32	40.0%	40.0%	40.0%	36.6%	50.0%	62.0%
Higher than 32	33.3%	40.0%	56.7%	56.7%	39.9%	23.9%
Education						
Secondary Education	0%	6.7%	3.3%	6.7%	16.7%	6.7%
Upper secondary level education	13.3%	20.0%	20.0%	16.7%	20.0%	40.0%
Lower tertiary education	23.3%	40.0%	56.7%	53.3%	46.7%	23.3%
Upper tertiary education	56.7%	26.7%	20.0%	23.3%	33.3%	23.3%
Doctoral or equivalent level education*	6.7%	6.7%			0.0%	0.0%
Financial situation						
Very Poor	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.4%
Poor	13.3%	16.7%	16.7%	10.0%	20.7%	17.2%
About average	26.7%	13.3%	16.7%	10.0%	62.1%	48.3%
Better than average	46.7%	50.0%	53.3%	63.3%	13.8%	31.0%
Much better than average	13.3%	20.0%	13.3%	16.7%	3.4%	0.0%

* Data from the Japanese sample did not distinguish between upper tertiary education and doctoral level

think these wishes will be fulfilled? That is, how do you expect your cooperation as parents to be in practice?”). Interviews were conducted by researchers, PhD students or Master's-level students working on the project, all of whom were similarly trained using the interview guide. Most interviews were conducted by the research team via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or similar software, with audio recorded after obtaining informed consent.

The broader study used the following general inclusion criteria: participants had to be (a) first-time parents, (b) part of a two-parent family (regardless of the gender of the parents), and (c) able to speak the local language. For the purposes of this paper, a subsample of 60 individual participants per country (i.e., 30 mothers-to-be and 30 fathers-to-be) was selected from the larger pool of interviews (92 in Finland, 88 in Japan, and 96 in Portugal). Interviews were conducted with individuals, and the unit of analysis in this study is the individual. To establish a basis for comparability of this cross-national data, we applied the following additional criteria for the selection of the subsample for analysis: we selected only couples with complete data (i.e., both partners were interviewed and both completed the survey); this criterion served sampling comparability, while analyses were conducted at the individual level. We selected only couples living in urban areas and whose nationality corresponded to the respective country (participants from other countries could introduce confounds in cross-national comparisons). In addition, to ensure that the selected samples closely matched national data, they were compared with national statistics across several demographic variables, including age, educational level, employment status before maternity

leave, and part-time/full-time work status. At this stage, couples in which one or both partners had a very high level of education or an above-average financial situation were excluded to minimize potential selection bias. Nevertheless, and perhaps due to our recruitment channels, the final sample remained relatively well-educated overall. Expectant mothers in Finland and Portugal had higher educational levels than their counterparts in Japan. A more detailed breakdown of participants by country is provided in Table 2. Although we invited families in diverse relationship constellations to enroll in the study, the final participants consisted only of individuals in heterosexual partnerships. The use of primarily snowball sampling and public recruitment channels may help explain the lack of same-sex couples in the sample.

For Finnish participants, the mean age of expectant mothers was 30.6 years ($SD=4.0$), while for expectant fathers it was 31.3 ($SD=4.3$). The majority of Finnish participants were married (63%), and they had been together as a couple for an average of 6.9 years ($SD=4.1$). None of the expectant fathers were on parental leave at the time of the interview, whereas 43.3% of expectant mothers were on leave. Of those participants who were employed at the time of the interview (70% of expectant mothers and 87% of expectant fathers), 25.0% of expectant mothers and 38.5% of expectant fathers worked nonstandard schedules (e.g., shift, night, or weekend work).

For Japanese participants, the mean age of expectant mothers and fathers was 34.3 ($SD=4.7$) and 34.7 ($SD=5.6$) years, respectively. All Japanese participants were married, and the average length of their relationship was 5.0 years ($SD=3.6$). Similar to Finland, 43.3% of expectant mothers

in Japan were on parental leave, while none of the expectant fathers were. However, unlike Finland, among those who were employed, a higher proportion of expectant mothers (26.7%) than expectant fathers (13.3%) worked nonstandard schedules.

For Portuguese participants, the mean age of expectant mothers was 30.0 (SD=4.3) and of expectant fathers was 31.1 (SD=5.3). Around half of the Portuguese participants were married (53%), and the average length of their relationship was 6.6 years (SD=3.5). As in the other countries, no expectant fathers were on parental leave, but in Portugal the proportion of expectant mothers on leave was lower (16.7%). Regarding work schedules, among those who were employed (93.3% of participants), 23.3% of expectant mothers and 19.0% of expectant fathers worked nonstandard hours. For additional information on the participants of each country, see Table 2.

Data Analysis Plan

The study was conducted by a cross-national team of researchers, with data collection and coding undertaken by team members in each country. We recognise that researchers' backgrounds (e.g., gender, professional training, cultural location and own experience of parenthood) can shape interviewing and interpretation. To support reflexivity, we used memoing after interviews, regular cross-team debriefs, documented coding decisions, and bilingual checks during translation; discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. These procedures were intended to surface assumptions about gender roles and national policy contexts and to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. A series of data analysis workshops was conducted among the teams to foster a shared understanding of the coding approach and themes. While the selection of questions to be analyzed from the broader interview guide was based on the research goal, the full interviews were read in their entirety by the coders. This ensured that all selected responses were interpreted within the broader narrative context of each participant. For team discussions and for presenting quotes in the English-language manuscript, bilingual team members translated selected excerpts and thematic summaries into English. To preserve original meanings, translators provided interpretative notes alongside raw translations, explaining any culture-specific terms or contexts. Furthermore, whenever an English translation of a quote or code was discussed, at least one native speaker from the respective country cross-checked it for accuracy and nuance. Where necessary, wording of translated quotes was slightly adjusted to best capture the original intent. The Portuguese team first performed a thematic analysis on this sample of interviews, guided by the research questions and following the six-phase approach

proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This included becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and producing a report. Each interview was read in the native language and independently coded by two researchers. An initial set of codes was developed collaboratively and discussed between the coders, from which a summary document with translated excerpts of key quotes and proposed themes emerged. A workshop was then held where the teams engaged in extensive verbal discussion in English to define each code, and discrepancies in interpretation were resolved collaboratively. This process helped to promote a balance between retaining culturally specific meanings and maintaining a coherent coding structure across countries. Following these discussions, some modifications were introduced to simplify the coding system. Each country team continued coding in the native language of the interviews (i.e., Finnish, Japanese and Portuguese) to minimize the loss of nuance through translation. Once the coding system was finalized, all teams applied it to the full set of interviews and prepared a summary report in English. Initially, all tasks, household chores and childcare responsibilities, were treated under the broader category of "division of labour." However, as the analysis progressed, it became clear that participants often distinguished between types of tasks, sometimes emphasizing specific childcare activities (e.g., playing or bathing the baby) while minimizing or omitting household chores (e.g., cleaning or cooking). These distinctions were retained in the final themes and highlighted where relevant in the discussion section of this paper, especially when they reflected gendered patterns in task allocation. Because some interviewees were partners, we clarify that the unit of analysis was the individual interview. Introducing a dyadic layer would require a distinct analytic framework (e.g., linking partners' interviews and coding dyadic agreement/discordance) and was beyond the scope of this cross-national study of 180 interviews focused on cross-country comparability. Mothers' and fathers' perspectives are summarised at the group level by country. We prepared this report in accordance with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and provided a completed checklist (Appendix B) mapping items to manuscript pages.

Results

We aimed to explore the main influences that shaped how first-time parents anticipated the division of labour and childcare during the transition to parenthood. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, we identified three overarching themes that were evident across all three countries:

Personal Influences, Gender Role Attitudes, and Contextual Influences. Below, we present the findings organized under these thematic headings, integrating participants' narratives across different topics and countries. All quotes presented to illustrate each theme were translated into English from the original Finnish, Japanese, or Portuguese interviews. Pseudonyms and participant roles are indicated in parentheses to preserve anonymity. Additional illustrative quotes, organized by theme and country, are provided in the Supplementary Table in Appendix A.

Personal Influences

Many expectant parents highlighted personal factors, such as health, personality traits, and individual preferences, as key influences on how they planned to share tasks. Participants often emphasized that considering each partner's personal circumstances and characteristics would lead to a more workable and satisfying division of labour. For example, one Portuguese father-to-be noted that his partner's chronic health condition would require him to take on more physically demanding baby-care tasks: "It will already be difficult for (my partner) to pick (the baby) up alone, to bathe her... due to her health problem. So I say we will do it together, never (her) alone." ('Filipe', Portuguese father-to-be). In this case, the couple's plan for caregiving was directly shaped by an individual health issue, with the father anticipating stepping in to alleviate the physical burden on the mother.

Individual personality preferences were also frequently mentioned as a guide for task allocation. Couples across all three countries explained that aligning responsibilities with what each person is naturally "good at" or enjoys would make parenting and housework more manageable. Many described a desire to play to each partner's strengths to reduce stress and conflict. One Portuguese expectant mother illustrated how her own personality traits informed her expectations, explaining:

...I'm always much more paranoid and meticulous about things. It's always been in my nature. It's a role he would never occupy. ... I'm one of those extremely irritating people, and I know that there are things that can only be done well if they are done by me. ('Irene', Portuguese mother-to-be)

Similarly, a Japanese father-to-be anticipated a trial-and-error approach where tasks would be divided according to competencies: "We will try and see how the division of housework goes. Based on who is good at or bad at what, we could divide housework." ('Makoto', Japanese father-to-be). A Finnish mother-to-be expressed a comparable

expectation that certain childcare duties would naturally fall to the parent who was more inclined or interested in them: "...there are preferences: the other likes to do something, and the other less, then that affects how we divide household work. ... My partner is interested in some things in care and bringing up, like playing with the child. ... I anticipate that these will then go to him." ('Elsa', Finnish mother-to-be). Notably, some participants acknowledged that these personal "preferences" often aligned with traditional gender norms. For instance, both women and men in some Finnish interviews commented that because women like to do most of the cleaning, the female partner would likely assume primary responsibility for cleaning tasks. In such cases, what seemed like individual choices or talents could actually reflect broader cultural expectations about gendered roles.

Another personal influence on anticipated arrangements was the interplay between complementarity and similarity in partners' personalities. Across all countries, some couples believed that differences in temperament would help them balance childcare and housework (i.e., complementarity), while others felt that sharing similar traits or values would make cooperation smoother (i.e., similarity). Both approaches seemed to offer expectant parents a sense of reassurance in managing upcoming responsibilities. A Japanese mother-to-be described how her and her husband's contrasting dispositions would be an asset in parenting:

We have very different personalities. My husband is not easily agitated. He stands tall and thinks everything will be fine. I, on the other hand, analyse everything, thinking this could happen and that could happen, minor possibilities included. ... Our personalities seem to complement each other. ('Mio', Japanese mother-to-be)

In contrast, some couples highlighted the value of similarity in personality or mindset. For instance, a Finnish mother-to-be noted: "It is in the best interest of the child to have two equal parents." ('Anna', Finnish mother-to-be). Whether through complementary traits or shared attitudes, couples derived confidence from their relational dynamics. They anticipated drawing on each other's strengths—either through contrast or alignment—as they navigated the transition to parenthood.

Gender Role Attitudes

Beliefs about gender roles and equality significantly shaped how participants envisioned dividing childcare and domestic tasks. While many couples across Finland, Japan, and Portugal expressed support for gender equality, their accounts sometimes revealed implicit traditional assumptions. This

theme highlighted tensions between stated ideals and ingrained norms, with some plans reflecting subtle expectations about “men’s” and “women’s” roles. In Finland, discussions of anticipated arrangements were often framed around egalitarian attitudes. One expectant mother from Finland explained how she and her partner had proactively talked through their values and fears about an unequal burden falling on her shoulders:

...we’ve had to share all the responsibilities so far. We discussed it already before we tried to have a child. I fear that the sole responsibility would fall on my shoulders. I am not really career-oriented now or anything, but because I have put in the effort to be educated, I think we should share parenting equally. We have discussed this a lot. (‘Liisa’, Finnish mother-to-be)

Some Finnish participants even mentioned a desire to “do things differently” from their own parents and to redefine fairness in their relationship. In a few cases, this meant envisioning a reversal of typical gender roles. As one Finnish mother put it, “...We have no gender specialized work, or if we have – we only have shared tasks and male tasks” (‘Johanna’, Finnish mother-to-be), indicating that in their household they deliberately did not designate any duties as “women’s work.” In line with this, Finnish fathers-to-be also voiced their rights and intentions to be equally involved. One father emphasized that caregiving should not be seen as solely a mother’s domain:

...it’s as much a man’s right to stay at home with the child. It has been somewhat surprising to many (that we think like that). We both value equality and want to have an equal footing, or at least aim for that. We are attentive not to accidentally slip into such [traditional] stereotypes. (‘Leo’, Finnish father-to-be)

In Japan and Portugal, ambivalence was more evident. Expectant parents often voiced egalitarian ideals while simultaneously acknowledging or accepting a more traditional division of roles, due to social pressures or practical realities. Some Japanese and Portuguese participants strongly wished for equality but anticipated challenges in achieving it. A Japanese father-to-be expressed a personal determination to break away from the old-fashioned model of fatherhood he associated with earlier generations, saying, “I do not want to be a father of the Showa era (1926–1989); I want to be involved in my child’s life... I’ll make time (for my child) on weekends and at night and make sure to spend time with her. I don’t want to leave everything to my wife.” (‘Naoki’, Japanese father-to-be). His resolve illustrates an aspiration toward a more involved paternal role than what

he perceived as the norm in the past. However, many Japanese parents-to-be also recognized the constraints of societal expectations on their plans. Traditional workplace cultures and social norms in Japan make it difficult for fathers to reduce work commitments, which in turn affects couples’ arrangements. As one expectant mother explained, “It is not easy for my husband to work fewer hours as such an idea is not well accepted in Japanese society. If that is the case, then I think I should do it as I am a woman, making arrangements must be easier.” (‘Yui’, Japanese mother-to-be). This comment reflects how personal beliefs in equality can be overridden by external pressures.

Portuguese participants voiced a similar mix of progressive and traditional views. One Portuguese mother-to-be observed the ongoing cultural shift, noting both progress and remaining hurdles:

We are getting closer to a society that favours [gender equality] more. But we have a very recent history of dictatorship. Even when parents wanted to do certain things, they couldn’t because of the shame of not being socially accepted or judged. (...) This is undermining the way coparenting exists. We are getting closer to the right way, but there are still a lot of these ideas about what the man can or cannot do and what is the woman’s role or not. (‘Carina’, Portuguese mother-to-be)

This quote highlights how deeply rooted norms, reinforced by relatively recent historical contexts, continue to influence expectations for mothers and fathers, despite a general trend toward more equal views.

Some couples firmly rejected the notion of the mother as the default primary caregiver and insisted on an equal partnership. For instance, another Portuguese mother strongly criticized the common phrase that implies fathers only “help” with children: “I think the statement that ‘the father has to help’ is very bad. For me, the father doesn’t have to help, the father has to participate just like me. He doesn’t help me. He does as I do.” (‘Carla’, Portuguese mother-to-be). A Japanese mother-to-be similarly argued against the idea of the father as a mere helper, stating that each parent “should take initiative in child rearing... It is not that he helps me. He should take initiative in child rearing. That is ideal.” (‘Asahi’, Japanese mother-to-be). These voices underline a desire for true co-parenting, where both parents see themselves as equally responsible leaders in raising their child. In contrast, in both Japanese and Portuguese contexts, other expectant parents conveyed more traditional or biologically oriented beliefs about gender roles. These participants, while not outright opposing equality, often assumed that women might be naturally better suited for certain tasks,

especiallly in the early stages of the baby's life. A Portuguese father-to-be, for example, remarked, "...Inside the home, naturally, the woman has a better notion of what needs to be done." ('Jorge', Portuguese father-to-be), implying an intrinsic female aptitude for managing household tasks. Along similar lines, some fathers noted the unique role of mothers due to biology. A Japanese father-to-be reflected on his biological limitations and the need to adjust expectations accordingly: "My wife is the only person who can breast-feed our baby. I can do physically demanding housework like bathing a baby and changing diapers. (...) We have to adjust how we cooperate as we do." ('Manabu', Japanese father-to-be). Here, the father acknowledges that certain aspects of infant care are inherently the mother's domain, whereas he sees his role in more supportively "physical" tasks.

Connected to these ideas, many couples across Portugal and Japan expected that the mother would initially have a stronger bond with the newborn and might even become more "possessive" of the baby in the early months. This was often attributed to the special mother-infant connection through breastfeeding and constant contact. In Portugal, most fathers-to-be who mentioned this possibility did so without resentment, treating it as a natural dynamic. At the same time, a few mothers-to-be voiced concern that their close bond with the baby could inadvertently limit the father's involvement. One Portuguese mother noted delicately, "Mothers tend to be... I don't want to use an unpleasant word... But eventually even more possessive about this relationship with the baby, also because of breastfeeding." ('Alexandra', Portuguese mother-to-be). This comment suggests an awareness of how maternal attachment might lead to gatekeeping or exclusion of the father, even if unintentionally.

Moreover, some mothers-to-be in Japan openly preferred or expected to handle most childcare themselves. One Japanese mother admitted, "To be honest, I don't want my husband to intervene in how I raise the child. I would prefer to raise a child in the way I like." ('Yui', Japanese mother-to-be). Another expectant mother from Japan anticipated being solely responsible on weekdays: "We have not divided housework/childrearing. After all, I will be the only one who takes care of everything on weekdays." ('Sara', Japanese mother-to-be). These perspectives show that despite desires for equality, a number of women in the study were prepared to (or even preferred to) assume a traditional primary-caregiver role, either due to personal choice or the practical expectation that it would end up that way.

Across all three countries, one common thread in these gender attitude narratives was an emphasis on achieving a fair division of labour, even if that did not always mean a strictly equal split at every moment. Many expectant

couples talked about "fairness" in terms of each partner contributing according to their capacity or time availability. For instance, a Japanese mother-to-be reflected that she was comfortable doing a larger share of chores given her husband's long work hours, as long as they both recognized each other's efforts:

Frankly, I will do a lot of housework and child rearing activities (...). I think it is okay. ... If he comes back home late, then I want him to do what he can do with that constraint... It's difficult to explain but if both of us acknowledge each other's contribution, then I am fine with that. It is not about what percentage of housework I do or he does. ('Mari', Japanese mother-to-be).

Likewise, a Portuguese mother-to-be who planned to work part-time (while her husband worked full-time) expected to take on more baby-related tasks simply because she would have more free hours in the day. She reasoned that a perfectly equal split made little sense in their situation:

When I go back to work, I'll be part-time, he'll be full-time. So I think that the tasks connected to the baby, I have to be able (...) to do more. I have more free time, I can sleep more, rest more. It doesn't make sense to split it 50/50, when one of us has more of an overload outside. He needs time to rest. ('Inês', Portuguese mother-to-be).

A Finnish mother-to-be similarly acknowledged that the division of responsibilities would likely shift at times depending on who was at home: "I believe that the collaboration will be good. There will be, for sure, those periods when the other one is at home with the child, then that will affect the responsibilities at home." ('Elsa', Finnish mother-to-be).

In summary, while ideals of gender equality were prominent in participants' discourse, their ultimate goal was an arrangement perceived as fair and workable for both partners. This often meant accepting an imbalance in duties during certain periods, such as when one partner had heavier work commitments or a newborn required maternal care, as long as both partners were contributing in line with their abilities and time. Especially in contexts like Japan and Portugal, where fathers frequently face long working hours and mothers take extended parental leave, couples emphasized mutual understanding and flexibility over rigid equality.

Contextual Influences

Beyond personal attributes and attitudes, a range of contextual factors shaped how couples anticipated dividing their roles. These external influences included the availability of family support, cultural practices around childcare, workplace policies, and broader work–life arrangements. Participants’ narratives show that the social and economic context in which they live can either facilitate or constrain their desired division of labour.

One major contextual influence was support from extended family. In all three countries, many parents-to-be expected to receive help, both practical and emotional, from their families, especially from female relatives such as their own mothers and mothers-in-law. This kind of support was often mentioned spontaneously in the interviews, underscoring how integral family assistance is to new parents’ plans. For example, a Finnish mother-to-be anticipated significant help from her nearby mother, saying: “...I get most help from my mother who lives in [rural municipality]. We are really close. She’s really excited about this newborn.” (‘Helena’, Finnish mother-to-be). Here, ‘Helena’ expresses confidence that her mother will provide both hands-on assistance and emotional encouragement once the baby arrives.

Japanese couples similarly highlighted the role of family networks. One Japanese father-to-be explained that they even chose where to live with the expectation of nearby family help:

(When you need some help, who would you ask?) “I guess my parents and step-parents.”

(Is there any preference?) “Well, my wife’s parents live relatively close to us. We will ask them first.”

(When you chose where to live, did you intentionally choose the current place because it was closer to your wife’s parents’ home?) “We chose the one that was closer to my wife’s parents.”

(Did you think about getting some help for childrearing?) “Yes, that was part of the reason.(...)” (‘Kenta’, Japanese father-to-be).

In ‘Kenta’s’ case, having his in-laws nearby was seen as an important resource that influenced both their housing decision and their confidence going into parenthood. Another Japanese mother noted that both her own parents and her in-laws stood ready to help when needed: “Both my and my husband’s parents live relatively close (...), they will help us whenever necessary.” (‘Kaori’, Japanese mother-to-be).

Despite the general expectation of family support, the extent of help available varied among participants, and some faced challenges due to geography or family dynamics. A number of couples noted that living far from close relatives would limit the assistance they could count on. For instance, a Portuguese mother-to-be who did not have family nearby worried about coping without that extra help: “We don’t really have a family member close by that can provide extra support. (...) a lot will fall on our shoulders.” (‘Rita’, Portuguese mother-to-be). Again, in Japan, even when distance is an issue, cultural practices offer some solutions. It is common for new mothers in Japan to engage in “*Satogaeri*,” meaning returning to one’s parents’ home for the late stages of pregnancy and the postpartum period. One Japanese father shared that, because he sometimes has to work nights and knew his wife might be overwhelmed alone, they planned for her to go stay with her parents for a short time after the birth: “My wife’s parents’ home is near our home. I must work night shifts sometimes. It could be overwhelming for my wife, so I suggested that she should do *Satogaeri*.” (‘Haruto’, Japanese father-to-be). This arrangement shows how cultural norms and family support systems intersect to help manage the transition to parenthood in the context of demanding work schedules.

On the other hand, in Portugal, a few participants expressed a desire to set boundaries with extended family to protect their new nuclear family’s autonomy. They were cautious about interference or unsolicited help from relatives. For example, one Portuguese mother-to-be anticipated that an over-eager grandparent could disrupt their own parenting process:

“One of the factors that might [influence our organisation] is how intrusive our family might be... I don’t want one of the grandmothers to come along and say ‘no, I want to do it!’ and take the child away and that’s it. Neither me nor the father want that... Or that old idea of grandparents thinking that it should be the woman who does some chores...” (‘Jéssica’, Portuguese mother-to-be).

While appreciative of family support, ‘Jéssica’ clearly valued the couple’s independence in defining their roles, free from older generational stereotypes. This sentiment, though not widespread, suggests that in familistic cultures like Portugal, where extended kin are often closely involved, support can sometimes become overinvolvement (Silva & Matos, 2004). In such contexts, the risk of enmeshment (i.e., blurred generational boundaries and limited individual autonomy) may be more pronounced. Interestingly, while couples in Japan also operate within a collectivistic framework, they did not express this concern spontaneously.

This may reflect cultural differences in how hierarchy and boundaries are managed. In Japan, clear role expectations and vertical social structures may reduce overt conflict or the need for explicit boundary-setting (Hofstede, 2001; Roland, 1988). Thus, although both Portuguese and Japanese families emphasize interdependence, the ways in which support is offered and negotiated differ culturally, shaping how autonomy is experienced during the transition to parenthood.

Expectant parents in Finland, while somewhat less explicitly familistic than those in Japan or Portugal, also mentioned drawing not only on their mothers and mothers-in-law but also on a broader support network. They talked about getting help or advice from siblings, friends, and other families with young children. Often, friends were seen as sources of moral support and shared experiences, whereas parents were expected to provide more tangible help. As one Finnish mother explained, “Well from friends mostly emotional support. That means that I can share concerns and joys, but from my parents I guess I expect help... So if I need help, I can probably get concrete help.” (‘Hannele’, Finnish mother-to-be).

In summary, across the three countries, extended-family support influenced how couples imagined caregiving responsibilities, at times supporting their ideal of shared parenting, and at other times potentially reinforcing traditional, gendered divisions of labour. In Portugal and Japan, grandparents were often expected to help with childcare several days a week, reflecting long-standing familial traditions. While this support could ease mothers’ workloads, it sometimes reinforced gendered caregiving roles, particularly when grandmothers, rather than fathers, assumed primary responsibility. At the same time, increasing nuclearisation has reduced access to such help. In Finland, where public childcare is more accessible and families are often geographically dispersed, parents relied more on formal services but still valued practical and emotional support from family and friends.

Another critical contextual theme was the influence of work–care arrangements and parental leave policies on couples’ expectations. Virtually all participants were part of dual-earner couples up until the pregnancy, and they had to consider how their jobs and leave entitlements would shape the division of childcare. A common pattern across countries was the expectation that the mother would take the majority of available parental leave, with the father taking a smaller portion (if any) of the leave. This was often seen as a given or default plan. In Portugal, for example, most couples assumed both partners would return to full-time work after the mother’s maternity leave (and perhaps a short paternity leave for the father) concluded. In Finland and Japan, some mothers mentioned possibly reducing their

work hours or going part-time after the baby, but fathers generally planned to continue full-time employment. These decisions were influenced both by personal choice and by workplace norms or economic necessity. One aspect frequently mentioned was work flexibility. If either partner had flexible working conditions or the ability to work from home, they anticipated a more balanced sharing of childcare and housework. For instance, a Portuguese father-to-be who worked in the tech sector felt that remote work would enable him to be highly involved at home: “Regarding work, (...) at the moment I’m in remote work... I think I can reconcile all the things well because I have that freedom...” (‘Artur’, Portuguese father-to-be). Similarly, a Finnish father noted that his flexible schedule would allow him to take on duties like night-time childcare, supporting their goal of equal sharing: “...We have planned that all household work will be shared equally. I have flexible working time, so I can take care of nights too.” (‘Joel’, Finnish father-to-be). From Japan, a father-to-be described his strategy to gradually delegate tasks at his job so he could work more from home and improve his work–life balance: “Instead of working a fixed time, I could work from home by allocating my work to my subordinates gradually. (...) If I can do that, my work-life-balance could be better.” (‘Souta’, Japanese father-to-be). These examples show that when some fathers have, or create, flexibility in their work, they see it as an opportunity to contribute more substantially to childcare and domestic tasks, which could lead to a more equitable division. Despite the advantages of flexibility, a few participants raised potential downsides. A Finnish father, for example, wondered if working from home might blur the lines and cause misunderstandings with his partner: “I wonder if my wife understands then that I am working even when I am home.” (‘Elias’, Finnish father-to-be). This comment suggests a concern that being physically present at home, due to remote work, could lead to assumptions that he is available for childcare or housework at all times, potentially leading to tension if not communicated well. Thus, while flexible work arrangements can facilitate shared caregiving, they also require negotiation of boundaries.

Another set of contextual factors revolved around job security and the type of employment. Participants indicated that the stability of their jobs (i.e., permanent vs. temporary contracts) and the nature of their work (e.g., self-employed, academic, shift work) influenced how they planned their leave and division of duties. For instance, a Portuguese mother-to-be on a temporary contract in a training phase expressed uncertainty about her future work location and stability, which made it hard to plan for long-term childcare division: “The ideal would undoubtedly be to already have a (...) fixed and stable workplace in the long term. (...) I’m in training (...) so when I finish, I’ll have to apply

for a position. And in about three years' time, I don't know exactly where I'll be placed." ('Diana', Portuguese mother-to-be). Her situation highlights how precarious employment can add complexity to planning family responsibilities, as the couple may not know what their work-life context will be a few years down the line. Self-employment or working in demanding professions was another theme. One Portuguese mother-to-be explained that because both she and her partner were self-employed, taking the full length of parental leave available to them would be difficult. They anticipated cutting leave short to return to their business:

"I won't be able to take advantage of all my leave. So, I'll take what is required by law, which is two months, and my partner will take another month. Then, depending on progress, we may have to give up the remaining time and resume working. (...) That (...) is a consequence of our life and of both being self-employed. If the scenario was different, either one or the other would take full advantage [of the leave]." ('Catarina', Portuguese mother-to-be).

Here, economic and career pressures clearly shape the planned division of leave. Despite valuing the time at home with the baby, the couple feels constrained by their work situation to shorten that period.

In Finland, where social policies generally support parental leave, participants still noted differences based on employment conditions. For example, one Finnish mother-to-be, who had a secure public-sector job, planned to take a substantial leave, whereas her partner's temporary job meant he couldn't be away for very long. She reflected on how a more secure job for him might have allowed a different arrangement: "Well, I have a permanent employment relationship. That means that I can leave and be with [the baby] for a certain period of time without any problems from my employer (...). Then again [my partner] is temporarily employed and he cannot be away for a longer period. But if [my partner] had a similar job to mine, a traditional one, I would definitely divide the parental leave differently." ('Eevi', Finnish mother-to-be). This illustrates how even with progressive leave policies, the realities of one's specific job (e.g. fear of contract non-renewal or workplace pressure) can influence how couples divide that leave and, by extension, early childcare duties. Especially in Japan, workplace culture and policies were frequently mentioned as limiting fathers' involvement at home. While Japan has been expanding paternity leave policies on paper, cultural uptake has been slower. Some Japanese fathers-to-be described navigating their company rules to take at least some time off around the birth. One father recounted his surprise and relief upon discovering that his company was

more accommodating than he expected: "I looked up the company policy, and it said that I can take a parental leave a few weeks before and after the expected date of birth, so I took it early... I have heard that a man took one year of paternity leave. I did not know before, but my company has a generous policy." ('Yamato', Japanese father-to-be). Yamato's experience shows a hopeful side: with supportive company policies, some Japanese fathers are beginning to make use of parental leave entitlements. However, it was clear that such cases are still noteworthy exceptions. More commonly, Japanese (and to some extent Portuguese) fathers expected to have very limited time off, which in turn meant their partners expected to handle the bulk of childcare during those early months.

Discussion

Our main goal was to explore the ways in which expectant first-time parents envision the distribution of tasks once their baby is born, as well as the factors that contribute to these expectations, across three different countries. We aimed to highlight diverse cultural perspectives and shared patterns that help define this division of labour. Across all countries, expectant parents recognized the importance of their personal characteristics (i.e., health conditions, individual preferences, complementarity between partners) as significant influences in shaping their anticipated roles. Participants noted that their division of household work was often based on individual preferences (i.e., the "liking" of certain tasks over others). These "preferences" can reflect cultural views on gender roles and a tendency to act in accordance with societal norms. This is consistent with Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), which suggests that gendered behaviours and preferences emerge from the roles society assigns based on the broader division of labour.

When interviewees mention "liking" as a determining factor, it is often an implicit agreement without explicit negotiation of the division of labour. They hope that the arrangement will remain the same, or that both partners will mostly be able to do the tasks they enjoy, without needing discussion. When considering the impact of individual preferences on the division of domestic tasks, it is important to underline that "natural preferences" or "liking" particular tasks may reinforce internalised values and beliefs stemming from broader cultural, social, and institutional factors (Bünning & Hipp, 2022). This becomes particularly relevant when a division based on "liking" reinforces patterns that restrict one partner's time and pursuits outside the home, or consistently burdens one partner, the one who happens to "like" tasks that are more continuous and time-consuming (e.g., feeding and bathing the baby, as opposed to playing).

Therefore, it is essential to closely examine gender role attitudes, which are often linked to both individual dispositions and broader cultural influences.

Differences and similarities across the three countries were evident in how gender role attitudes were expressed, either explicitly or implicitly. Finnish parents-to-be openly endorsed gender equality and emphasized its importance in shaping their division of tasks. These findings are consistent with Finland's longstanding commitment to gender equality in both policy and culture (Julkunen & Nätti, 1999; Hautamäki, 2010). However, even in Finland, some participants conveyed more traditional assumptions implicitly. For instance, when they described caregiving preferences in gendered terms, such as mothers "liking" certain tasks more. In contrast, Portuguese and Japanese participants also expressed support for gender-equal ideals, yet their expectations often aligned with more traditional models in which mothers are primarily responsible for domestic and childcare duties. While both countries reflect familistic traditions, Portugal has seen more rapid policy and social changes promoting paternal involvement (Perista et al., 2016), whereas Japanese structures and norms have remained more resistant to change (Raymo & Lim, 2011; Yu & Kuo, 2018). As a result, Japanese parents-to-be were more likely to view lower paternal involvement as both expected and fair within their sociocultural context, a perspective less common in Portugal. This cross-national pattern once again supports Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), which posits that societal roles and available opportunities shape individual expectations. In Finland, structural support and egalitarian norms foster more symmetrical parenting expectations. In Japan and, to a lesser extent, Portugal, more constrained opportunities for fathers and persistent gender norms contribute to a less balanced anticipated division of labour, even when couples espouse gender-equal values.

Building on these cultural patterns, it is equally important to consider how structural and demographic conditions, such as education, employment, and economic stability, interact with cultural norms to shape couples' anticipatory beliefs about caregiving. In this study, the Finnish sample had higher levels of educational attainment and more stable employment, particularly among women, which may contribute to the stronger articulation of egalitarian ideals and shared caregiving goals (Deole & Zeydanli, 2021). In contrast, in Japan, more limited employment flexibility and higher rates of part-time or non-regular employment among women may reinforce the expectation that mothers will assume greater caregiving responsibilities. In Portugal, despite relatively high female labor force participation, participants sometimes described job insecurity or unstable work trajectories, which may create uncertainty that affects caregiving expectations. These contextual factors likely

interact with cultural norms and welfare policies to shape not only what participants believe is fair, but what they see as feasible in practice.

The ambivalence observed in all three countries, where a discrepancy exists between endorsing the importance of gender equality and yet expecting the mother to be primarily responsible for caregiving, can be partially explained by the fact that parental leave is predominantly taken by mothers. Across the three countries, there is a general acceptance that it is reasonable for mothers to assume the majority of domestic and childcare responsibilities due to their greater availability of time after childbirth. Consequently, a gendered and predominantly female division of care in the initial months following birth is perceived as a temporary arrangement and not considered a threat to one's overall belief system or identity consistency. LaRossa (2007) differentiated the culture of fatherhood from the conduct of fatherhood. The culture of fatherhood refers to the norms and beliefs surrounding fatherhood, whereas the conduct of fatherhood refers to what fathers actually do. LaRossa (2007) argues that the culture of fatherhood changes first, and conducts changes subsequently. We believe that in Finland, a more progressive country in terms of gender equality, cultural ideals and actual practices around fatherhood are relatively well aligned. In contrast, in Portugal and Japan, where gender equality is still evolving, there appears to be a gap between what people believe fathers should do and what fathers can realistically do in practice. However, this does not mean that Portugal and Japan are necessarily on a path to becoming "like Finland." Rather, the development of fatherhood norms and behaviors will depend on the unique social, cultural, and institutional characteristics of each national context.

The role of contextual factors, such as reliance on extended family support and the conditions of paid work and parental leave, was also strongly emphasised by participants. In all countries, future parents expressed an expectation of receiving support from close family members; and in Finland, from close friends as well. However, geographical distance from family was seen as a barrier to accessing such support. In societies where young people are increasingly relocating from rural areas to urban centres for education and work, this issue may become more prevalent (Migration Data Portal, 2022). Several participants expressed dissatisfaction about being unable to rely on important family members, especially during the initial transition to parenthood. While this theme was present in all three countries, its meaning varied. In Portugal and Japan, the expectation of grandparental involvement, particularly from grandmothers, was common, reflecting long-standing familistic norms. However, some Portuguese parents-to-be voiced a desire to establish clearer boundaries with extended families

to protect the autonomy of the new nuclear family. In contrast, Japanese participants rarely expressed this concern, possibly due to stronger cultural norms around respect, hierarchy, and indirect communication in intergenerational relationships. In Finland, reliance on extended family was less emphasized overall, and participants more often spoke of support from friends or formal childcare services, consistent with Finland's social-democratic welfare model and the higher geographic dispersion of families. It is also worth noting that, across all contexts, there was a persistent expectation that female family members, particularly grandmothers, would be the ones to provide practical support. This expectation persisted even when participants firmly expressed egalitarian values and the intention to move away from the traditional roles of their parents' generation. These accounts suggest that a gendered division of care may continue indirectly through the help new parents receive, reinforcing traditional caregiving patterns even in contexts striving for equality.

The characteristics of paid work, such as flexibility, employment type, and perceived stability, were key factors shaping participants' expectations regarding the division of childcare and labour, particularly in relation to fathers' involvement. Work flexibility was seen as essential for balancing professional and family responsibilities, enabling greater paternal engagement. Likewise, the type and stability of employment influenced how parents anticipated managing time and resources. Cross-country differences in labour market structures and gender norms shaped how these factors were experienced. In Finland, participants generally described stable employment situations, often accompanied by family-friendly work policies and a supportive welfare state. These conditions contributed to expectations of more balanced divisions of care and labour, especially when fathers had access to flexible schedules or parental leave. In Portugal, despite high levels of female labour force participation, some participants reported precarious or unstable job conditions. This instability created uncertainty that often led couples to fall back on more traditional caregiving arrangements, even when they valued equality. In Japan, rigid work culture and long working hours, especially among men, were seen as major obstacles to shared caregiving. Fathers were sometimes described as less available due to the demands of full-time or overtime work, which limited their perceived capacity to participate in childcare regardless of intention. These national differences highlight how structural labour market conditions, shaped by policy, economic context, and cultural expectations, inform what couples view as possible or realistic when imagining their future roles as parents. Overall, our findings are in line with the idea that not only do expectations and contextual constraints place limitations on preferences (Bünning & Hipp,

2022), but so do parents' physical, psychological, and emotional resources, as well as the desire to complement each other's strengths and vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

The interpretation of these results and subsequent discussion should be informed by the study's limitations, namely. Although the subsample was drawn from couples for sampling comparability, analyses were conducted at the individual level and we did not model within-couple interdependence; therefore, results reflect individual anticipations rather than dyadic consensus. It is also important to consider cultural nuances in interpreting the data contributed by each country's team. In our team meetings, we actively discussed and reflected on potential cultural biases to acknowledge them and use this awareness to enrich our understanding of the results. The complexity of conducting thematic analysis across multiple languages should also be acknowledged. While each team coded interviews in their native language, maintaining consistency across translations and conceptual categories required deliberate effort. Through structured joint workshops and collaborative refinement of themes, we addressed linguistic challenges and cultural nuances. Although language differences pose interpretive challenges, we believe our iterative and dialogical process enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis. We highlight this as both a limitation and a methodological strength, illustrating the value of intentional reflexivity in cross-cultural qualitative research. It is also important to note that, despite collecting a large number of interviews, our analysis focused on data collected at a single point in time and from individual perspectives rather than couples jointly. In addition, our recruitment methods, such as snowball sampling, social media, clinics, and parenting groups, may have influenced the composition of our sample. For example, participants recruited through clinics or parenting networks may have been more engaged with formal systems of support, while social media recruitment may have attracted individuals with higher digital literacy or specific lifestyle interests. These methods may have under-represented parents with lower levels of social connectivity or those less inclined to participate in qualitative interviews, potentially skewing the dataset toward more engaged or reflective perspectives on the division of labour. As a result, our sample consisted mostly of highly educated individuals in heterosexual partnerships, representing a particular subset of parents within each society. Consequently, our findings may not capture the expectations or experiences of same-sex or gender-diverse parents during the transition to parenthood. Future studies would benefit from a dyadic couple perspective to explore shared constructions

of anticipatory beliefs, as well as from more diverse and longitudinal samples to examine how these beliefs translate into post-birth arrangements over time. Finally, data collection (2020–2021) overlapped with COVID-19 lockdowns and the rapid expansion of remote work. Evidence from this period points to elevated psychological distress (e.g., Brooks et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020) and reconfigured work–family arrangements, with telework sometimes facilitating more equal sharing but, in other cases, intensifying gendered divisions (Shockley et al., 2021). We did not explicitly probe pandemic effects; nevertheless, participants’ anticipations were likely formed within these atypical conditions (e.g., childcare closures, home confinement, shifting workplace expectations). Findings should be read with this context in mind and may not fully generalise to non-pandemic circumstances.

While this study has limitations, it offers a meaningful contribution to understanding how first-time parents in different cultural and policy contexts begin to anticipate caregiving roles during pregnancy. By examining perspectives from Finland, Japan, and Portugal, we highlight both common themes and culturally specific dynamics that shape expectations around the division of labour. We hope this study encourages further research that pays close attention to the anticipatory phase of parenthood, particularly in diverse national contexts. For policymakers and researchers, our results point to the importance of supporting not only formal gender equality but also the broader social and institutional conditions that allow parents to enact more balanced caregiving roles in everyday life.

Based on our analysis of 180 interviews from three different countries (Finland, Japan, and Portugal), we identified five main influences with a significant impact on respondents’ expectations regarding the division of labour: personal characteristics, gender role attitudes, perception of fairness, extended family support, and work-care arrangements (including parental leave taking). When considering personal characteristics, parents underlined the importance of accounting for chronic health conditions of either parent, individual preferences (i.e., what each partner preferred to do), and complementarity between the two partners’ approaches to optimize their efforts. Cultural gender attitudes and expectations also play a role in shaping these personal preferences. Gender role attitudes were discussed in all three countries, albeit with some differences. Finnish parents-to-be emphasised the importance of a gender-equal division of domestic and childcare tasks, and some mentioned ideas of gender-role reversal and fathers’ equal right to be involved. By contrast, Japanese and Portuguese respondents often referred to traditional societal expectations and expressed a contradictory stance: they desired a more gender-equal division but often expected a more

traditional division. Finnish respondents most explicitly articulated a “need” for gender equality, while Portuguese and Japanese respondents expressed more of a “wish” for it. In Japan, there appeared to be a higher tolerance for the father’s reduced involvement due to demanding professional obligations. The perception of fairness, even if not strict equality, was emphasised by respondents from all countries. Only Portuguese and Japanese parents mentioned that women are naturally more suited for parenthood in the initial stages of the child’s life, given the mother’s ability to breastfeed, which in turn may lead the mother spending more time in care-related tasks. Respondents from all countries underlined the importance of having a distribution of labour that is perceived as fair, even if it is not equal. These results seem to be in line with the social and political history of each country in regards to movements for gender equality and the creation of legislation that supports both parents’ involvement in childcare. In line with Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), the roles afforded by each society’s structural and cultural context appear to shape new parents’ expectations: Finnish couples, operating in a context of strong gender-equality norms and supports, anticipate more egalitarian divisions, whereas Japanese and Portuguese couples, facing more traditional role structures and constraints, often revert to gendered task allocations despite their egalitarian aspirations. Through this study, we underline the importance and potential long-term impact of policies that support gender equality and work-family reconciliation for both parents. The support of extended family, especially grandparents, was frequently mentioned, not only in traditionally familistic countries such as Portugal and Japan, but also in Finland. Professional domain characteristics such as parental leave conditions, work flexibility, the ability to work from home, and the stability and type of employment were also mentioned across contexts. In Japan, demanding professional work environments were often cited as constraints on paternal involvement in childcare and domestic work.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-026-03272-7>.

Funding Open access funding provided by FCT|FCCN (b-on). This work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), Portugal (Grants SFRH/BD/145924/2019 and 2022.13549.BD; UID/00050/2025, <https://doi.org/10.54499/UID/00050/2025>), the Research Council of Finland (Grant Nos. 323492 and 323493), and Toyo University Top Priority Research Program.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions imposed by the approving ethics committees and data protection regulations.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the ethics committees of all participating institutions.

Conflict of Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication Participants provided informed consent for anonymized data to be published.

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