Children & Society

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Children & Society

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Understanding Fathers Engagement: Contextual Insights From Tajikistan and Azerbaijan

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Received: 9 October 2024 | **Revised:** 31 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 29 October 2025

Keywords: Azerbaijan | fathers' engagement | parental engagement | parental roles | Tajikistan

ABSTRACT

Research on parental engagement often portrays fathers as less involved in their children's lives compared to mothers. This paper challenges such a perspective by examining fathers' engagement within the socio-cultural contexts of Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. We explore how fathers contribute to their children's everyday lives, using two complementary studies, one in rural Wakhan, Tajikistan, and one in urban Baku, Azerbaijan involving a total of ten families. Our analysis draws on qualitative data from fieldwork, visual participatory methods, and interviews with mothers and fathers. The findings reveal three culturally embedded forms of fathers' engagement: (1) engaging beyond physical care, (2) creating spontaneous learning moments within daily activities, and (3) facilitating educational opportunities through fulfilling culturally assigned roles as family providers. In light of these findings, we call for broadening the conceptualisation of fathers' engagement through a culturally responsive lens, urging researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to recognise and address fathers' role within sociocultural frameworks that acknowledge and respect their diverse situations and contexts.

1 | Introduction

The role of fathers in family life and children's development has received increasing scholarly attention over the years. While most studies have focused on Western, middle-class, white contexts (Diniz et al. 2021), recent scholarship is beginning to explore non-Western contexts, acknowledging diverse approaches to fathering across different socio-cultural environments (Fitzgerald 2022; Kisbu et al. 2024; Li et al. 2021; Shwalb et al. 2012). Several studies from the Global South have examined fathers' involvement in childcare and household duties (Izci and Jones 2021; Sriyasak et al. 2024), practices more commonly associated with the Global North (Jeong et al. 2018; Owino and Yigezu 2023; Sriyasak et al. 2024). However, there is still a need to better understand how cultural expectations shape fathers' roles in the Global South (Kisbu et al. 2024; Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky 2021), as fathering takes place (as do all elements of childrearing) within the complex nexus of societal roles and understandings.

Fathers have often been portrayed as *absent* or *distant* from their children's lives in both Global South and Global North contexts (Biber 2016; Tudge et al. 2000). In many traditional societies in the Global South, patriarchal norms and the structured roles of fathers as breadwinners have reinforced this perception of fathers' invisibility (Rubin et al. 2025). Despite fulfilling their expected responsibilities, fathers are often criticised for not being sufficiently involved in their children's lives. These criticisms arise from a modern view of fatherhood influenced by socio-economic changes in high-resource and industrialised societies and women's increased participation in the labour market (Cabrera et al. 2014). This contemporary perspective expects both mothers and fathers to share the same types of work and childrearing responsibilities.

Despite increased research on fatherhood, the conceptualisation of fathers' engagement remains narrow. Traditionally, it has been measured through direct participation in childrearing, co-parenting, and household duties, as researchers have relied on quantifiable indicators (Palkovitz and Hull 2018). Although there have been calls to shift the focus from quantity to quality (Cabrera et al. 2018), the emphasis remains on visible involvement, overlooking indirect contributions (Hawkins and Palkovitz 1999).

The term fathers' engagement is usually defined through the model developed by Lamb et al. (1985), which includes three core components: *engagement* (direct interactions with the child), *accessibility* (availability to respond to the child's needs), and *responsibility* (activities without direct interaction with the child, such as deciding on schools). Pleck (2010) later refined this model to capture the quality of fathers' involvement. He introduced positive engagement, emphasising fathers' interactions that promote children's development, alongside warmth and responsiveness. Pleck (2010) also expanded the responsibility aspect by distinguishing between (a) *indirect care* (doing child-related tasks without direct interaction with the child) and (b) *process responsibility*, referring to fathers' proactive role in monitoring and ensuring the child's care and well-being.

While these multidimensional definitions of fathers' engagement collectively offer a comprehensive understanding of fathers' roles, the focus has been primarily on fathers' direct engagement and interaction with their children (Izci and Jones 2021). This emphasis has often led to an underappreciation of the indirect ways in which fathers contribute to their children's development (Cabrera et al. 2018; Pleck 2010). Drawing on critiques of the narrow conceptualisation of fathers' engagement, we define fathers' engagement in a way that not only includes the visible, time-based, and direct involvement in childrearing but also accounts for fathers' invisible and indirect roles, shaped by societal and cultural norms in a non-Western context. By focusing on Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, we aim to explore parents' understanding of fathers' engagement and the complex and varied ways fathers engage with their children. Using a strength-based approach, we reconceptualise fathers' engagement by drawing on two recent studies conducted in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. We developed the following research question specifically for this paper, and both studies contribute findings to address it: *How do fathers in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan engage in their children's learning, as influenced by their social and cultural contexts?*

This paper challenges a homogeneous view of fatherhood, arguing for a broader understanding of fathers' engagement in diverse sociocultural settings. We demonstrate that fathers in our studies in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan engage in their children's lives not through physical childcare or shared household duties, but by fulfilling their culturally assigned roles. While this differs from conventional models, it reflects these fathers' commitment and care.

We argue that current frameworks for understanding fathers' engagement are insufficient to capture the complexity of fatherhood across diverse social, cultural, and economic contexts. This paper calls for a broader understanding of fathers' engagement that: (a) recognises diverse expressions of fathers' engagement across cultural contexts; (b) values both direct and indirect contributions to children's development; (c) acknowledges how sociocultural frameworks shape engagement; and (d) challenges deficit-based approaches that might measure fathers universally against Global North middle-class norms and/or mothers' engagement.

1.1 | Deficit Approach to Fathers' Engagement and Its Criticism

In the early 19th century, fathers' primary role as providers, specifically their financial contribution, was considered a central aspect of fatherhood. With shifts in gender roles and the increased participation of women in the labour market, the concept of fatherhood expanded from being solely a breadwinner to include more nurturing and direct involvement of fathers in their children's daily care (Cabrera et al. 2014). This shift became 'a yardstick to measure and determine who were "good fathers"' (Saracho and Spodek 2008, 823), but the traditional role of the father as a 'good provider' became associated with negative traits, such as being distant and fulfilling the expectations of the new fatherhood (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001). This overemphasis on fathers' visible and direct engagement led to a deficit approach to fatherhood, focusing on 'men's inadequacies in the contemporary paternal role' (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997, 14) rather than acknowledging their full contributions to their children's lives. Moreover, many of these judgements were based on white, Western, middle-class norms (using a 'dominant lens'), which, when applied to marginalised communities, resulted in deficit rather than nuanced understandings of the roles fathers play in their children's lives (Kisbu et al. 2024; Lemmons and Johnson 2019; Love et al. 2023; Wilson and Thompson 2021).

The deficit paradigm is very common in studies of parenting and parental engagement, particularly regarding parents from disadvantaged groups, where poverty is often associated with poor parenting strategies (Goodall 2021). However, in studying fatherhood, the deficit paradigm is frequently observed across various contexts, portraying fathers as distant (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001). This view stems from comparing fathers with mothers, who are typically reported as more involved (Li and Lamb 2015). Consequently, 'good fathering' is often defined by the levels of engagement seen in mothers (Palkovitz 1997, 204). Moreover, much of the work in the field uses norms taken from a minority group (white, middle-class parents) and imposes these standards on all other groups, without taking into account issue of context, culture, and society (Kisbu et al. 2024; Lemmons and Johnson 2019; Love et al. 2023; Wilson and Thompson 2021).

In the Global South, especially in rural contexts, this deficit model is intensified by comparing fathers not only to mothers but also to the expectations of the 'new fatherhood'. This shift assumes that fatherhood should be uniform across cultures, subcultures, and socio-economic classes (Palkovitz 1997) with limited recognition of the socio-cultural, economic contexts, and societal expectations that shape fathers' roles (Lan 2023). In countries facing extreme economic challenges and limited job opportunities, the expectation of new fatherhood is overly 'ambitious' and 'unattainable' (Roy 2014, 426), as fathers are still confined to their role as family providers (Liu and Zheng 2021).

Previous research challenges the deficit approach to fathers' engagement (Palkovitz 1997; Saracho and Spodek 2008) questioning whether 'absent' fathers are truly absent (Roy 2014, 432). Critiques argue that such a deficit approach oversimplifies fatherhood, ignoring its complex and multidimensional nature (Palkovitz and Hull 2018). Cabrera et al. (2018) note that many studies rely on mothers' accounts of fathers' engagement or assess it based on frameworks designed for mother–child relationships. This approach not only limits our understanding of fathers' engagement with their children but also reinforces a deficit perspective by focusing on what they lack compared to mothers, particularly in caregiving tasks (Cabrera et al. 2018).

To deconstruct such a deficit model, previous research suggests considering the social, cultural, and family context within which fathers fulfil their role (Roy 2014; Saracho and Spodek 2008). Situating fatherhood within these contexts can provide a more accurate and holistic understanding of 'real fatherhood' as it exists within diverse family settings and contexts (Cabrera et al. 2018). This approach moves beyond the hegemonic 'ticks and clicks' to examine fathers' engagement (Hawkins and Palkovitz 1999, 25). Building on these perspectives, in this paper, we adopt a strength-based approach to rethink fathers' engagement by drawing on two recent studies in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

1.2 | Research Contexts: Tajikistan and Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, both former Soviet countries, have unique cultural and geographical identities shaped by their respective histories and locations. Azerbaijan, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia in the South Caucasus, is bordered by the Caspian Sea, Georgia, Türkiye, Armenia, Russia, and Iran. With a population of about 10 million, predominantly living in urban areas, Azerbaijan is a secular state where Shia Islam is the largest religion, reflecting a diverse yet unified cultural landscape (Committee 2025). In contrast, Tajikistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, with a population size similar to that of Azerbaijan, and 73% of its population living in rural areas (UNICEF 2021). While the majority of Tajiks are Sunni Muslims, the people of Gorno-Badakhshan, including Wakhan, the research area, are predominantly Ismaili Muslims, with distinct cultural and linguistic traits (Iloliev 2022).

In both countries, family structure is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms shaped by social, cultural, and religious elements, with traditional gender roles clearly defined (Jumakhonov et al. 2020; UNFPA-Azerbaijan 2018). In Tajikistan, women often live with their in-laws after marriage, and extended families, especially in rural areas, commonly live together due to cultural norms (Muminova 2025). Similarly, in Azerbaijan, cohabitation with extended families is common, although there has been a recent trend of more young families choosing to live independently (UNFPA-Azerbaijan 2018). The family structure in both countries is reinforced by cultural values that assign specific roles; though gender roles are gradually evolving due to increased urbanisation and globalisation (UNFPA-EECARO 2023).

While both countries share overarching patriarchal structures, regional differences highlight varying degrees of gender equality. For example, in many rural parts of Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, traditional views prioritise boys' education over girls', and women's opinions are often excluded from decision-making processes (UNFPA-EECARO 2023). However, in the Gorno-Badakhshan region (Tajikistan) and in Baku (Azerbaijan), a more progressive approach allows men and women to enjoy greater equality (Faucher 2018; Heyat 2014). These variations highlight a spectrum of cultural practices and attitudes toward gender equality across both countries.

Regarding parental leave policies, both countries have systems inherited from their Soviet past, though with significant modifications. In Azerbaijan, mothers are entitled to three years of maternity leave, with 126 days paid at full salary, while fathers receive 14 days of paid paternity leave. However, in Tajikistan, mothers are offered 140 days of paid leave, but paternity leave is not legally mandated, reflecting the traditional division of childcare responsibilities (UNFPA-EECARO 2023).

In both countries, men are primarily responsible for providing financial support and making decisions, while women handle house duties and childcare (Kasymova and Billings 2018; UNFPA-EECARO 2023). In Tajikistan, male labour migration to Russia has disrupted these traditional roles, often leaving women to take on household decision-making in nuclear families, while in extended families, in-laws may assume leadership roles (Lambrecht et al. 2025). New generations of fathers are also beginning to share some household responsibilities more equally with their spouses, especially in urban areas of Tajikistan and Azerbaijan (Hilalova 2014; Kasymova and Billings 2018). Despite these changes, the perception of men as the primary breadwinners and heads of households remains strong in both countries.

1.3 | Overview of Tajik and Azerbaijani Studies

The research contexts for the two studies reported here reflect distinct yet complementary settings. The Tajikistan study took place in rural Wakhan (2022–2023), while the Azerbaijani study was conducted in urban Baku (2018–2019). This intentional contrast provides valuable insights into how parental roles and family dynamics manifest across different socio-economic and geographical contexts within post-Soviet states. Although neither study initially focused specifically on fathers' engagement, this theme emerged strongly in both. Both countries share patriarchal cultural values and a majority Muslim population, yet differences in economic conditions and the rural–urban divide shape family roles in unique ways. In urban Azerbaijan, many mothers are working professionals, yet fathers' engagement in their children's learning resembled the traditional division of labour in rural Tajikistan. Recognising these similarities and differences sparked our interest in this collaborative paper to explore how modernisation, tradition, and post-Soviet transitions shape family dynamics and fatherhood. In the Azerbaijani study, the research focused exclusively on five-year-old children, whereas the Tajik research studied children between the ages of three and six. The selection of these specific age ranges was informed by both studies' initial emphasis on early childhood education.

The Azerbaijani study explores young children's digital media practices within five Azerbaijani households with a five-year-old child over a 15-month period. By focusing on the everyday interactions of children in Azerbaijan, the study offers a new perspective on how cultural and family dynamics shape digital media practices in a Global South country. Situated within ecocultural theory (Tudge 2008), the research examines how children's digital practices are intertwined with parental beliefs and cultural contexts, responding to calls for more diverse studies beyond the Global North. The study introduces a new participatory research method, the Living Journals approach, in which mothers generated data, a process that not only decentred the researcher from data generation but also generated rich, multimodal insights into family dynamics (Savadova 2024). The research also highlights influences of family preferences on digital content, including language and device hierarchy, and how parental aspirations for their children's multilingual futures shaped these everyday practices (Savadova and Gillen, forthcoming).

The Tajik study employed a qualitative case study approach, grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978) to explore parental engagement. Five families with preschool-aged children (three to six years old) were selected; the key criterion was that at least one child was enrolled in preschool. Families were chosen based on their commitment to the video-diary approach, access to smartphones, and ability to use them, especially among the older generation, due to the remote data collection method. Data was gathered through online semi-structured interviews, children's video-diaries, and policy document reviews. After the interviews, parents acted as proxy researchers (Plowman 2017), recording and sharing their daily activities. Video-elicitation interviews further explored key moments from the videos, providing insights into parent–child interactions and the informal, naturally occurring ways families engage with children's learning at home (Muminova 2025). The study reveals parents' engagement in their children's learning through everyday life, shaped by family dynamics and their cultural contexts. It shows how understanding parental engagement requires considering various sociocultural factors to fully appreciate the unique contributions parents make to their children's education (Muminova 2024).

2 | Research Methods

Each study utilised digital participatory research methods with families and children (Coyne and Carter 2018). The table below provides a brief overview of the research methods employed in each study (Table 1).

2.1 | Family Demographics

Both studies employed a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Thomas 2021), involving five families in each. The family demographics for both studies are presented in Tables 2 and 3, with all names being pseudonyms.

Both studies adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). Ethics approval for both studies was granted by the University of Edinburgh. Informed consent, both oral and written, was obtained from children and families. Given the importance of involving young children, a relational and contextual approach to ethical conduct with families and children was adopted (Montreuil et al. 2021). We have addressed the ethical implications of involving young children in respective studies elsewhere (Muminova 2024; Savadova 2023). In the Tajik study, the video-diaries were recorded in a home environment where other extended family members were present. Hence, informed consent was received from all family members even though they were not the direct participants of the research. In the Azerbaijani study, consent from all family members was renewed at various stages of the research.

TABLE 1 | Overview of research designs in both studies.

Azerbaijan—researched by Author 2	Fieldwork—3 family visits	Visited families, mothers and children in their homes and conducted several methods including semi-structured interviews, room tours
	Remote data generation—Living Journals	Generated visual and textual data remotely through mothers and turned them into journals to discuss with fathers separately, mothers and children together
Tajikistan—researched by Author 1	Online semi-structured interviews with parents	Conducted semi-structured interviews with two mothers and three fathers
	Children's video diaries	Gathered video clips about the lives of children and their families, shared by either mothers or fathers (depending on activity)
	Video-elicitation interviews	Online Discussion with both mothers and fathers about critical moments from their child's video-diary

TABLE 2 | Family demographics in the Azerbaijani study.

Azerbaijani study				
Family	**Person**	**Name**	**Age**	**Occupation**
Elcan Aliyev's family	Participant child	Elcan	5 years 1 month	
	Mother	Narmin	30 years	Homemaker
	Father	Ayaz	33 years	Entrepreneur
Khumar Hajiyeva's family	Participant child	Khumar	5 years 3 months	
	Mother	Banu	32 years	Finance Analyst
	Father	Nazim	32 years	Procurement Specialist
Yasin Mammadov's family	Participant child	Yasin	5 years	
	Mother	Fatima	31 years	Public Servant
	Father	Nadir	30 years	Taxi Driver
	Grandmother	Safayat	52 years	Homemaker
Kamala Azadova's family	Participant child	Kamala	5 years	
	Mother	Sara	26 years	Teacher
	Father	Murad	34 years	Shop Assistant
Bilal Rzayev's family	Participant child	Bilal	5 years 1 month	
	Mother	Amina	29 years	University Teacher
	Father	Osman	33 years	Computer Engineer

TABLE 3 | Family demographics in the Tajik study.

Tajikistan study				
Family	**Person**	**Name**	**Age**	**Occupation**
Amin's family	Participant child (3 siblings)	Amin	6 years	
	Mother	Mahina	35 years	Housewife
	Father	Amir	42 years	Labourer
Bob's family	Participant child (2 siblings)	Bob	3 years	
	Mother	Guli	35 years	School Teacher
	Father	Muiz	38 years	Driver
Farahnoz's family	Participant child (1 sibling)	Farahnoz	4 years	
	Mother	Jahon	40 years	School Teacher
	Father	Rahmon	44 years	Labourer
Jonik's family	Participant child (2 siblings)	Jonik	3 years	
	Mother	Fariza	35 years	Housewife
	Father	Farhat	34 years	Driver
Rasul's family	Participant child (1 sibling)	Rasul	5 years	
	Mother	Ramziya	31 years	School Teacher
	Father	Yunus	30 years	School Teacher

2.2 | Data Analysis

In both studies, although fathers' engagement was not the initial focus of investigation, we identified it as one of the main themes that emerged from our analyses. Therefore, we decided to analyse our data further through the research question posed earlier in the paper.

Both studies employed reflexive thematic analysis through a six-step process (Braun and Clarke 2006) beginning with familiarisation and progressing through initial coding to theme development. Interview transcripts, including visual data, were uploaded to data analysis software for coding purposes. The software's multimedia capabilities allowed us to code video segments, photographs, and text simultaneously and to identify patterns across different data formats. Special attention was paid to both descriptive elements and interpretative meanings in the visual data (Rose 2022).

First, within each anonymised dataset, each family's case was analysed separately. Then we integrated the findings through a matrix framework that allowed us to compare themes across the families' cases. Following the cross-case analysis within datasets, we cross-analysed the themes found in their separate datasets. We particularly focused on how visual data complemented and sometimes challenged insights from traditional interview data across datasets (Pink et al. 2016). This multimodal analysis revealed nuances in fathers' engagement that might have been missed through interview data alone. The themes that emerged across multiple families in both datasets are discussed in the findings section below.

3 | Findings

In this section, we introduce findings from the data analysis of both studies, following the research question mentioned above. We first discuss parents' 'deficit' approach to fathers' engagement. Then, we categorise fathers' engagement into the following three key forms:

- Fathers' engagement beyond physical care;
- Fathers' spontaneous engagement:
- Fathers as 'opportunity providers'.

3.1 | Parents' 'Deficit' Approach to Fathers' Engagement

In both studies, fathers and mothers participated in generating data. Initially, early interactions with parents in both countries reinforced the belief that fathers were not actively involved in their children's lives. Both mothers and fathers pointed out that mothers were primarily responsible for raising and educating the children, while fathers 'did not do anything' (Jahon's Interview, Tajik mother). However, as further discussions and a deeper analysis of video-diaries from Tajikistan and living journals from Azerbaijan progressed, a more nuanced picture emerged. Fathers were indeed involved in their children's learning, but their contributions were often overlooked or undervalued. For example, in the Tajik study, Amin's father, Amir, initially claimed that childcare was mainly his wife's responsibility. Yet, as the conversation continued, it became clear that he was also engaged in his children's learning and play, though he did not perceive these moments as particularly important.

> My wife does everything for my children - wash their faces in the morning, change their clothes, feed them, and send them to preschool.
>
> (Amir's interview, Tajik father)

> If I build something, my daughter helps me by bringing small stones to fill gaps ... my son gets busy with the hammer... I show my son how to do this step by step, or sometimes I deliberately slow down when he watches me.
>
> (Amir's interview, Tajik father)

The video-diaries further demonstrated how Amir involved both his son and daughters in manual tasks, such as building walls or repairing items around the home. In his video-elicitation interview, Amir emphasised the importance of teaching practical skills to his son, Amin, just as his own father had taught him, hoping that Amin would acquire useful skills as a backup in case he did not succeed academically. A similar dynamic was observed in Farahnoz's family in the Tajik study. Although Farahnoz's mother initially claimed that her husband was not involved, the video-diary revealed a different story, capturing Rahmon, Farahnoz's father, actively participating in leisure activities and engaging playfully with his daughter.

> I do everything myself for my children. I read for them, buy them clothes, wash their clothes, bath them, anything you can think of. Their father does not do anything.
>
> (Jahon's Interview, Tajik mother)

In one video, Rahmon was seen playing checkers with his daughter, Farahnoz, while other family members, including her grandfather and uncles, cheered her on. The video was recorded by Farahnoz's uncle. Despite Jahon's earlier claims of Rahmon's lack of involvement, the video-diary captured his active interaction with Farahnoz and his efforts to facilitate her learning through play. The atmosphere was playful and supportive, contributing to Farahnoz's self-confidence and overall wellbeing. Other moments included Rahmon building snowmen with Farahnoz or teaching her lessons on care and sharing, using a public fountain as a teaching moment. Although Rahmon did not assist with schoolwork or direct caregiving, he contributed to Farahnoz's everyday learning through play and practical guidance.

In the Azerbaijani study, Banu, Khumar's mother, mentioned that despite her husband's full-time office job, after work he spent most of his time at home playing with their children, while she managed the household chores. In contrast, fathers in the other families reported that they lacked the time or patience to play with their children, though they were willing to drive their children to places or buy whatever they requested. They viewed

playing with the children and helping with homework as tasks primarily for mothers. Fathers expressed similar sentiments regarding helping with schoolwork.

> I am not patient as much as his mother when it comes to playing games with him. I can take him where he wants, to swimming, park or wherever during summer.
>
> (Osman, Azerbaijani father)

> His mother teaches him most of the time. I don't have patience. Teaching kids is not for me. I can take them wherever they want but not teaching. I can teach for a short while, but I don't have the patience.
>
> (Ayaz, Azerbaijani father)

In the Azerbaijani study, fathers often expressed a lack of patience and time to engage directly in their children's learning. However, several living journal entries showed that fathers contributed in other ways, such as driving their children to relatives' homes, malls, and entertainment venues on weekends. They were also ready to assist with digital technology, as illustrated by Bilal's and Elcan's fathers, who mentioned helping their sons when they encountered difficulties using digital devices.

The findings from both studies suggest that while these fathers may not have engaged in direct childcare, they played certain roles in their children's learning through teaching life skills, participating in play, and facilitating extracurricular activities. This prompted a deeper investigation into why both mothers and fathers undervalued fathers' contributions to their children's learning. A more detailed analysis of parents' accounts, alongside video data, revealed that both mothers and fathers held a deficit-based approach to fathers' engagement. These perceptions were shaped by several factors, including parents' beliefs about what fathers' engagement should entail, the broader social and cultural context, and the societal roles traditionally assigned to mothers and fathers. The following sections delve into these elements in greater detail, outlining three forms through which fathers in these studies engaged in their children's lives.

3.2 | Fathers' Engagement Beyond Physical Care

Further data analysis in both studies revealed that both mothers and fathers had a limited understanding of fathers' engagement, restricted to the *physical care* of the children. This perspective led to an underestimation of the broader contributions fathers made to their children's lives. Since childcare is viewed as the main responsibility of women in both countries (Habibov et al. 2017; Kasymova and Billings 2018), both mothers and fathers associated it with the mothers' role when asked about their involvement.

> My wife does everything for my children – wash their faces in the morning, change their clothes, feed them, and send them to preschool.
>
> (Amir's interview, Tajik father)

In Amir's and Ayaz's responses, for example, they specifically highlighted their spouse's role in physical childcare. Similarly, in the Tajikistan study, Farahnoz's mother and Bob's father discussed how mothers helped children get ready for preschool, prepared meals, and dressed them, among other tasks. In the initial interviews with all families in the same study, there was no recognition of the fathers' role in childcare, except in Jonik's family. However, the video-diaries, living journals, and follow-up interviews revealed a more complex picture. While fathers did not engage in tasks such as washing faces or changing clothes, they spent time with their children and helped them learn various life skills through everyday activities. This included involving children in refurbishment projects, teaching them farming, and instilling ethical values. These practices, though not part of direct childcare, were important aspects of fathers' engagement in their children's development and learning in both Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

3.3 | Fathers' Spontaneous Engagement

Another reason why fathers' engagement went unrecognised was its spontaneous and irregular nature, in contrast to the consistently routine activities carried out by mothers. In Tajikistan, mothers primarily recorded activities within the home, while fathers mostly captured outdoor tasks such as farming, harvesting, and refurbishing, except evening indoor activities recorded by either parent. In Azerbaijan, since fathers spent most of the day working outside the home, it was usually the mothers who recorded their children's activities for the living journals. However, fathers were visible in several outing pictures taken on weekends. The division of labour between spouses in both countries reflected societal expectations, shaping how mothers' and fathers' engagement was expressed within their respective domains of responsibility.

While mothers' engagement was consistently acknowledged by both parents, fathers' involvement in outdoor activities was largely overlooked when discussing fathers' roles. The findings suggested that fathers' engagement was often underappreciated because it was not as regular or routine as that of mothers. This may also be due to the different values parents place on various activities. For example, in Tajikistan, when asked why she did not mention her husband teaching their son farming and refurbishment skills, Guli, Muiz's wife, responded:

> ... but he [referring to her husband] doesn't do that all the time.... yes, he does things here and there, but it isn't what I do every day...
>
> (Guli's video-elicitation interview, Tajik mother)

Further discussions with both mothers and fathers revealed that father-child interactions were often spontaneous, depending on factors such as the season, the type of activities fathers were involved in, and where they needed to be. In Tajikistan, Muiz was a truck driver who transported goods between Dushanbe and Vrang, meaning he was not always home. Similarly, Amir, another Tajik father, worked as a manual labourer and often travelled outside his village for work.

In the Azerbaijani study, Ayaz spent half of the month outside the country due to work commitments. As a result, these fathers engaged with their children only when they were home. For fathers who were consistently at home, their involvement with their children varied based on the day's tasks and the season. One day they might be farming, the next refurbishing the house or harvesting. These spontaneous and irregular activities were not considered significant when describing fathers' engagement and often remained unrecognised with remarks like 'doing things here and there' as explained by Guli, a Tajik mother.

3.4 | Fathers as 'Opportunity Providers'

In urban Azerbaijan, while many women work and contribute to household income, men are still predominantly viewed as the main providers, likely due to their higher incomes, full-time work commitments, and employment often requiring them to be away from home, as seen in Ayaz's case. In rural Tajikistan, fathers remain the primary breadwinners, as job opportunities for women are limited. Women typically stay at home, while men, like Muiz, Amir, and Farhat, take on physically demanding and unstable jobs, often far from home, to support their families. This reinforces the continued importance of the breadwinner role in these countries, where societal norms, expectations, and socio-economic conditions shape fathers' contributions to their families and their children's well-being and development.

Despite the crucial role fathers play in providing financial support, this contribution is often overlooked when discussing fathers' engagement. In Tajikistan, both mothers and fathers emphasised the mother's role in children's lives, except for Fariza, Jonik's mother, who praised her husband for his tireless efforts to financially support the family and for being their children's 'opportunity provider'. She reflected on her own childhood hardships and lack of educational resources:

> ... I don't want to say that my husband doesn't look after the children. His job is not easy, but he works very hard to earn money so our children can have whatever they need, whether it's preschool fees, stationery, clothes, or anything else for their education. He is our *opportunity provider* [original emphasis]. Without his financial help, I wouldn't be able to give our children the kind of education I want for them.
>
> (Fariza's interview, Tajik mother)

Fariza believed her husband played a vital role in supporting their children. As a manual labourer, he took on any available job, big or small, to provide for the family. Though her husband, Farhat, was unavailable to comment due to being either away at work or too exhausted, Fariza's account depicted him as a hardworking and dedicated father who sacrificed his health to ensure his children's education.

Similarly, in Azerbaijan, Narmin spoke about her husband's commitment to their three children's education in a private school in Baku, driven by his strong belief in the power of education. Despite criticism from relatives about their financial priorities, her husband continued to prioritise their children's schooling, even at the expense of other personal desires. Narmin emphasised the hardships her spouse endured, such as spending more than half the month on work trips and working late into the night, all to secure a better future for their children.

> My husband is a person with a good worldview...he thinks education is very important. Everybody is blaming us that you can buy a better car or another house. He is going through a lot of trouble so they can get an education. He thinks you can only do something through education. ... We want our children to have everything that we couldn't have.
>
> (smiling).
>
> (Narmin, Azerbaijani mother)

Narmin's account of her husband demonstrates that fathers in Azerbaijan, much like those in Tajikistan, contribute to their children's learning by making financial sacrifices to provide access to various educational opportunities. While these fathers may not directly participate in daily childcare, their involvement is a strong form of engagement. Despite its importance, this type of contribution often goes unrecognised in both regions.

4 | Discussion

Research on the role of fathers in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan is limited. In Tajikistan, to our knowledge, only one study has examined the meaning of fatherhood, focusing primarily on urban, educated fathers (Kasymova and Billings 2018) while the perspectives of those in rural areas, where social and cultural influences on fatherhood may differ, remain underexplored. Similarly, in Azerbaijan, to our knowledge, one study compares Turkish and Azerbaijani fathers' engagement, focusing on direct involvement (caregiving, leisure, school, discipline) and how father support programs promote active caregiving and shift gender norms (Mirzayeva and Dönmez 2024).

Our findings demonstrate fathers' engagement manifested in three different forms, shaped by their socio-cultural contexts:

First, it shows fathers' engagement beyond physical childcare in both Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. This evidence contributes to a more comprehensive view of fatherhood than is often reflected in international initiatives such as UNICEF's 'Super Dads' programme in Central Asia and the UN Women's 'School for Dads' programme in Azerbaijan, which focus on encouraging fathers to become more involved in physical caregiving and bonding (UNFPA 2022; UNICEF 2018). While these programmes are vital for promoting children's early development, advancing gender equality, and enabling women's workforce participation, their emphasis on direct caregiving may *unintentionally* convey the impression that fathers, who engage in other forms of support, are less involved or 'absent' (Ostapenko 2022). Such a view risks overlooking the diverse yet meaningful ways some fathers contribute to their

children's development, particularly through activities that may not fit Western-centric models of fathers' engagement (Li et al. 2021).

Second, our research reveals instances of direct, spontaneous, yet meaningful engagement among some participating fathers. This perceived irregularity was often a result of societal demands, including cultural norms and the necessity for many fathers to work not only outside the home but often far from their families. However, their contributions were often discounted as 'irregular' or inconsistent when compared to the daily interactions typically associated with mothers' actions. This coincides with critiques by Cabrera et al. (2018), who argue that fathers' involvement is often evaluated in comparison to mothers, with greater emphasis placed on direct, structured engagement. Our findings support these critiques that evaluations of fathers' engagement may fail to recognise the diverse ways in which some fathers contribute to their children's lives, focusing instead on traditional caregiving roles that tend to be more structured and routine (Cabrera et al. 2018; Hawkins and Dollahite 1997).

Third, the findings highlight fathers' role as opportunity providers, as they 'work very hard' (Fariza's interview, Tajik mother) to create opportunities and open possibilities for their children. This form of engagement reflects their distinctive way of participating in children's learning and supporting their academic achievement, shaped by the societal and cultural roles traditionally assigned to fathers as breadwinners in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. While general education is free in these regions, early childhood education remains fee-based, making it unaffordable for many families. Thus, the traditional role of these fathers as breadwinners remains crucial in both Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, given financial resources are scarce and access to education largely depends on available funds. Although most mothers in our sample were employed, fathers' contributions remained the cornerstone of family financial stability, shaped by low salaries and by deeply rooted patriarchal norms in the region. This highlights that in our participant families, fathers' distal engagement as providers continues to be essential, despite mothers' participation in paid work. In contrast to the 'new fatherhood' model in the Global North (Li et al. 2021), which emphasises direct and active involvement in children's lives, the role of some fathers as providers continues to be crucial in low-resourced settings, where financial support is vital for securing educational and many other opportunities for children.

The current studies indicate that some fathers, however, tend to undervalue the importance of their engagement. This underappreciation reflects broader societal beliefs and norms, where indirect engagement, such as providing financial support and opportunities, is largely unrecognised. This aligns with prior studies, which found that many fathers in Tajikistan viewed their work obligations as a barrier to being more directly involved in their children's education (Kasymova and Billings 2018). However, our studies demonstrate that while these perceived 'constraints' might initially suggest fathers' disengagement, a closer examination reveals them as a form of engagement, shaped by fathers' socio-cultural contexts.

The way fathers in our study engage with their children's education and learning resonates with Plowman and Stephen's (2013) *distal guided interaction*. In their study of young children's home learning with technologies in Scotland, they distinguish between distal guided interaction and proximal guided interaction, demonstrating how parents support their children's learning with technology from a distance by setting up the physical environment and providing necessary resources. We found the concept particularly useful in understanding how the fathers in both studies indirectly contributed to their children's education. These fathers made 'learning possible' through financial and material provisions, even if they were not directly involved in the learning process itself. We refer to this type of involvement as fathers' *distal engagement*.

These findings suggest that fathers' *distal engagement* and their role as breadwinners should not be viewed as a constraint to their engagement but rather as a way of showing their care and support to their children's learning and development. In both Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, fathers' financial support, though often distal and not always visible, demonstrated their role in securing children access to better educational opportunities. While financial provision may not be seen as a key contribution in societies with greater access to resources and job opportunities for both parents, in low-resourced contexts like Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, similar to rural China (Liu and Zheng 2021), being a reliable provider remains a crucial element of fatherhood.

In rural Tajikistan, where job opportunities for women are scarce and many labour jobs are physically demanding, fathers like Farhat take on heavy work to provide and 'make their children's learning possible' as noted by Farhat's wife. Unlike the 'new fatherhood' model proposed by Lamb et al. (1985), which emphasises direct and active involvement in children's lives and is grounded in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) context (Henrich et al. 2010; Li et al. 2021), certain fathers in these regions express their engagement through financial provision to support their children's access to early childhood education. Therefore, in these low-resourced settings, providing for educational expenses is not only financial support; it is a vital form of engagement that directly influences children's opportunities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a nuanced and complex picture of fathers' engagement in children's development in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. While some form of direct engagement was observed, the fathers' indirect engagement beyond physical childcare and their distal engagement emerged as a more dominant form of engagement. This matches Pleck's (2010) expanded model of fatherhood, encompassing not only direct engagement but also indirect roles such as opportunity provision and process responsibility and helps to capture the nuanced ways many fathers contribute to their children's well-being. As we have seen, fathers' engagement in these regions, based on the families in this study, may manifest in spontaneous, irregular moments and distal forms. These forms of engagement, though they may not fit the traditional model of fatherhood that has emerged in other contexts, are nonetheless important contributions to their children's learning and development.

4.1 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's small sample size of five families per context limits the generalisability of the findings. While the qualitative, multimodal approach provided rich insights into fathers' engagement, the experiences captured may not represent broader populations. Notably, most mothers in our samples were employed. Yet fathers maintained the primary breadwinner role, reflecting the low salaries for teachers (the employment of most of our respondent mothers) and the deeply rooted patriarchal norms in both countries. Future research with larger, more diverse samples is needed to examine how employment patterns influence fathers' roles and engagement across different family contexts. Such studies would allow for a deeper understanding of how economic realities and evolving gender norms intersect, and how fathers' roles and contributions adapt in low-resource settings. This approach aligns with the broader aim of rethinking fathers' engagement according to their social, cultural, and economic contexts, rather than relying on universal or Western-centric models of fathers' engagement.

5 | Conclusion

The findings from Tajikistan and Azerbaijan challenge prevailing perceptions of fathers' disengagement, a view often rooted in a deficit-based approach. The paper demonstrates fathers' engagement beyond physical childcare, manifested in their indirect, irregular, and spontaneous interaction with their children.

The paper reveals three critical insights that reshape how we can approach fathers' engagement: *First*, 'fathers' engagement' in these contexts extends beyond visible, routine caregiving practices to include the full spectrum of ways in which fathers support their children. This can include recognising that in low-resource contexts, being a reliable provider of necessary educational opportunities represents an important form of engagement. *Second*, the irregularity of fathers' interactions does not imply disengagement. It is important to move 'beyond the analyses of direct effects on Western traditional middle-class families' (Diniz et al. 2021, 93) and recognise how diverse conditions influence fatherhood. Instead of criticising fathers for not engaging in daily childcare, we suggest that future research adopt a strength-based and context-sensitive approach to studying fatherhood. This approach would acknowledge the diverse cultural, social, and economic realities that shape fathers' engagement. *Third*, fathers' engagement may be better understood within its specific sociocultural framework. The studies highlighted the fathers' important role as opportunity providers, a role often overlooked in discussions of fathers' engagement. Fathers in both studies made considerable efforts to ensure their children could access better educational opportunities by providing financial support from a distance. This reflected their alternative way of demonstrating care for their children, especially in low-resource contexts like Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, where access to educational opportunities often depends on financial resources.

Overall, by addressing the misperception about fathers' lack of engagement in two post-Soviet, Global South countries, this paper highlights fathers' distinctive way of engaging in their children's learning through irregular and spontaneous involvement embedded in their everyday activities, along with their role as opportunity providers. The paper contributes to the study of parental engagement by offering a culturally sensitive and context-specific understanding of fathers' involvement. By examining fathers' roles in diverse sociocultural settings, particularly in low-resource environments, our work also challenges the conventional, often Western-centric, frameworks of paternal engagement (Li et al. 2021). This approach fosters a more inclusive, culturally appropriate understanding of how fathers can meaningfully contribute to their children's lives.

While we acknowledge the fathers' distinctive ways of engagement in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan observed in these studies, it is important to note that we do not idealise any specific form of fathers' engagement, nor do we suggest that fathers should not be involved in traditional childcare responsibilities. We also recognise that the type of father engagement reported in this study may evolve over time as it has been in the Global North. While this may be difficult in rural Tajikistan, at least in the near future, due to limited job opportunities (Ochiai 2016) and low salaries, it may change in urban Azerbaijan due to increased female workforce participation and changing gender roles. Therefore, building on previous research (Cabrera et al. 2018; Palkovitz 1997; Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001; Hawkins and Dollahite 1997) we call for a culturally responsive approach to studying fathers' engagement within their specific contexts and time in which they live, rather than measuring it against mothers' caregiving roles or middle-class ideals of fatherhood that emerged in other contexts, such as the Global North.

Acknowledgements

We express our sincere gratitude to the participant families whose willingness to share their experiences with us made our studies possible. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editors for their thoughtful and constructive feedback.

Funding

The Azerbaijani study received funding from the University of Edinburgh College Research Award.

Ethics Statement

The research has received ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data is not shared.

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