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## From Tradition to Transition: A Socio-Economic Review of Stay-at-Home Males and Breadwinning Females in Contemporary Society

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### Abstract

The traditional male-breadwinner and female-homemaker family model, deeply embedded in patriarchal social structures, is undergoing significant transformation across contemporary societies. This narrative review synthesizes interdisciplinary literature to examine the socio-economic drivers and consequences of the rise of stay-at-home males and breadwinning females. Guided by Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory and Gender Role Theory, the review analyzes changes at macro (economic, educational, and policy), meso (family and workplace), and micro (individual identity and psychological well-being) levels. A cross-cultural perspective contrasts institutionalized egalitarian models in Nordic countries with contexts such as Punjab, Pakistan, where economic necessity increasingly challenges entrenched gender norms. The review identifies a central paradox: economic pressures accelerate role transitions, but cultural and institutional adaptation lags behind, producing persistent inequalities such as the motherhood penalty and societal stigma toward caregiving men. The paper concludes by highlighting critical research gaps and emphasizing the need for coordinated policy and cultural interventions.

**Keywords:** gender roles, stay-at-home fathers, breadwinning mothers, socio-economic change, family structure, gender norms, policy

### 1. Introduction

For much of modern history, the family was organized according to a gendered division of labor that positioned men as primary economic providers and women as caregivers responsible for domestic labor and childrearing. This arrangement was not merely functional; it was ideologically reinforced through religious teachings, labor markets, legal regulations, and cultural norms (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Oakley, 1974). Within this framework, masculinity became associated with paid work and economic autonomy,



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whereas femininity became tied to unpaid care work a dynamic that shaped identities, power relations, and life chances (Walby, 1990).

Feminist and sociological scholarship has long critiqued the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model for naturalizing gender inequality and masking the economic value of care work (hooks, 2000; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). During the latter half of the twentieth century, women's labor force participation increased substantially in many societies, facilitated by rising education, anti-discrimination laws, and changing cultural norms (England, 2010). This shift, however, rarely displaced the traditional family model in its entirety; rather, it produced hybrid forms in which women combined paid work with ongoing responsibility for domestic labor (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2012).

More recently, economic globalization, labor market restructuring, and rising living costs have introduced novel family configurations characterized by role reversals: **stay-at-home males**, who assume primary caregiving and domestic responsibilities, and **breadwinning females**, whose earnings constitute the main source of household income (Gerson, 2010; Craig & Mullan, 2011). These arrangements challenge not only conventional gender division of labor but also deeply held assumptions about gender identity, power dynamics, and the structuring of family life.

While research on female labor force participation and fathers' involvement in childcare has grown, the literature on stay-at-home males and breadwinning females remains fragmented and often geographically narrow. There is limited integrative synthesis that examines these role reversals as a socio-economic phenomenon, especially across diverse cultural contexts such as South Asia. This review seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive narrative that integrates macro-level structures, meso-level family and workplace dynamics, and micro-level psychological experiences.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

A robust theoretical grounding is essential to understand how structural forces and individual agency intersect in shaping gendered family roles. This review draws on two complementary frameworks: **Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory** and **Gender Role Theory**.

### 2.1 Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory

Pierre Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory elucidates how economic, cultural, and social capital interact to reproduce social structures and inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, families transmit not only economic wealth but also cultural dispositions and social networks that shape opportunities across generations. Within this framework, gender norms function as part of the field of power relations in which individuals navigate opportunities for capital accumulation and social mobility.

Women's increasing access to education (cultural capital) and participation in the labor market (economic capital) has altered the distribution of resources within households, potentially challenging traditional gender divisions. However, entrenched social norms and institutional structures (social capital) often resist such changes, reproducing gendered expectations and limiting the transformative potential of individual gains (Bourdieu, 1986; Díaz & Choi, 2016).

### 2.2 Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory posits that gender is not simply a biological category but a social construct shaped through interaction and performance (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to this perspective, individuals "do gender" that is, they enact societal



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expectations of masculinity and femininity in everyday behavior. Deviations from normative gender roles, such as men engaging in primary caregiving or women serving as the main earners, can evoke social sanctions and identity strain, particularly in contexts where traditional gender norms are deeply institutionalized (Connell, 2005; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Together, these frameworks facilitate a multi-level analysis — macro (economic systems, education, policy), meso (family and workplace dynamics), and micro (identity and psychological well-being) that captures how structural forces shape, constrain, and are reshaped by individual and collective practices.

### 3. Macro-Level Drivers of Transition

#### 3.1 Economic Restructuring and Labor Markets

Global economic restructuring characterized by deindustrialization in advanced economies, the rise of service sectors, and increased labor market flexibility has altered employment opportunities in ways that reshape household earning patterns (Kalleberg, 2011). Many traditional male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing and resource extraction, have declined due to automation and global competition, reducing stable employment opportunities for men with lower educational attainment (Autor, 2014). Meanwhile, sectors such as healthcare, education, services, and professional occupations which have higher female representation have expanded, enabling women's increased labor force participation and, in many cases, higher earnings relative to male partners (Goldin, 2014).

Empirical research demonstrates that **male job loss or income instability is associated with increased paternal involvement** in domestic labor and childcare, particularly when women's earnings provide economic stability (Hennecke & Pape, 2022). These shifts contribute to scenarios in which men take on greater domestic responsibilities, either temporarily or permanently a trend observed across varied socio-economic contexts (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Henwood & Procter, 2003).

In contexts like **Punjab, Pakistan**, rising inflation, informal employment, and persistent underemployment among men in urban and lower-middle-class households have intensified reliance on women's income (Jamal & Ashraf, 2020). Economic pressures may compel women to pursue paid work and men to assume caregiving and household roles, even where cultural norms strongly endorse traditional gender roles.

#### 3.2 Educational Transformation

Education plays a pivotal role in reshaping labor market outcomes and intra-household bargaining power. Across regions, women's educational attainment has increased steadily, narrowing or, in some contexts, surpassing that of men (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008). Education not only enhances women's earning potential but is also linked to greater aspirations for autonomy and egalitarian family arrangements (England, 2010).

Higher education equips women with cultural and social capital that can increase their influence in household decision-making and challenge norms that confine them to unpaid domestic work (Anker, 1998). However, the relationship between education and gender role transformation is mediated by cultural expectations; in societies where traditional norms remain strong, highly educated women may still encounter resistance when negotiating non-traditional roles (Kandiyoti, 1988).

#### 3.3 State Policies and Institutional Contexts

State policies are powerful determinants of family role configurations. Policies such as gender-neutral parental leave, subsidized childcare, and anti-discrimination measures can



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lower structural barriers to caregiving by men and labor market participation by women (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). For example, countries with extensive parental leave and “father quotas” reserved portions of leave that can only be used by fathers have higher rates of paternal caregiving and more equitable divisions of labor (Duvander & Johansson, 2012).

**Table 1. Policy Contexts and Gender Role Outcomes (Selected Countries)**

Country	Parental Leave Policy	Childcare Support	Implications for Gender Roles
Sweden	Generous shared leave with father quotas	Universal subsidized childcare	High acceptance of stay-at-home fathers; female breadwinning normalized
Norway	Shared leave, strong childcare support	Extensive subsidized childcare	Increased paternal involvement; decreased motherhood penalty
United States	Limited unpaid leave	Market-based childcare	Persistent gendered division of labor; limited paternal caregiving
Pakistan	Minimal paternity leave	Reliance on extended family care	Strong male breadwinner norm; limited institutional support

Policies have both direct and symbolic effects: they not only provide material resources but also signal normative acceptance of diverse family roles (O’Brien & Wall, 2017). In contexts with limited policy support, families often rely on informal networks, which can reinforce traditional role expectations rather than transform them.

**4. Meso and Micro Level Consequences of Role Transitions**

**4.1 Family Dynamics and Household Labor**

At the family level, household bargaining theory suggests that partners negotiate roles based on their relative contributions to household income and available resources (Becker, 1981). When women become primary earners, a shift in bargaining power can occur, potentially granting women greater influence over household decisions. However, the persistence of gender norms often complicates these dynamics.

Research shows that even when women contribute the majority of household income, traditional gendered expectations regarding domestic labor frequently persist, resulting in continued unequal division of unpaid work (Coltrane, 1996; Bianchi et al., 2012). Men who assume caregiving responsibilities may be appreciated at a practical level but still experience lower social recognition due to persistent cultural scripts that equate masculinity with paid work (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020).

Studies also indicate that marital conflict can arise when partners hold divergent expectations about gender roles, highlighting the importance of communication and mutual negotiation in role transitions (Crouter & McHale, 2005). The process of renegotiating roles is not merely functional; it involves emotional labor, identity work, and adaptation to new routines that challenge deeply internalized norms.

**4.2 Workplace Cultures and Organizational Norms**

Workplace environments play a key role in shaping individuals’ capacity to fulfill caregiving or breadwinning roles. Organizations that lack flexibility, impose long hours, or penalize employees for taking family-related leave create structural barriers to equitable role sharing (Williams, 2010). Evidence suggests that both men and women face penalties when they deviate from normative work-family paths: women may encounter the



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“motherhood penalty” in hiring and promotion, while men may experience stigma or career setbacks for prioritizing caregiving (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Rudman & Mescher, 2013).

Workplace cultures that valorize presenteeism and full-time attachment to the labor market disproportionately disadvantage caregivers, particularly in male-breadwinner oriented systems (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Conversely, organizations that implement flexible scheduling, telework options, and supportive family policies tend to facilitate more equitable sharing of paid and unpaid labor (Kossek et al., 2010).

### 4.3 Identity, Stigma and Psychological Well-Being

At the micro level, the experience of role reversal can have profound implications for personal identity and psychological well-being. Gender identity is often deeply ingrained through lifelong socialization, making transitions to non-traditional roles emotionally complex (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For caregiving fathers, increased involvement in childcare can enhance emotional bonds and life satisfaction, but may also produce tension when external social expectations conflict with their lived roles (Lamb, 2010).

Men occupying primary caregiving roles frequently report **identity strain** and feelings of isolation when societal recognition for caregiving is limited or absent (Henwood & Procter, 2003). Breadwinning women, while often empowered by economic independence, may experience **role overload** and increased stress due to the dual demands of paid work and ongoing responsibility for emotional labor and household management a dynamic sometimes referred to as the “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Mental health outcomes in families with non-traditional gender roles vary widely and are shaped by social support, workplace flexibility, cultural acceptance, and individual coping resources. Importantly, the **interaction between social stigma and personal identity** plays a significant role in shaping outcomes for both stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers.

## 5. Child and Family Outcomes

Research examining child development in families with non-traditional gender roles consistently indicates that children do not suffer adverse cognitive or emotional outcomes due to having a stay-at-home father or a breadwinning mother. Instead, several studies suggest that **exposure to egalitarian role models** contributes to flexible gender attitudes and socio-emotional competence in children (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

Children with actively involved fathers tend to display better social skills, higher academic engagement, and more secure emotional attachments than peers whose fathers are less engaged (Lamb, 2010). Similarly, having a breadwinning mother does not negatively impact children’s well-being; in fact, maternal employment is often associated with improved economic security and broader social opportunities for children, particularly when supported by high-quality childcare (Baxter, 2012).

Importantly, family functioning and child outcomes are influenced not merely by the presence of a non-traditional role but by the quality of relationships, parental well-being, and stability of care arrangements (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). These findings underscore that the structure of caregiving roles matters less than the emotional climate and security within the family.

## 6. Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Nordic Countries and Punjab, Pakistan

### 6.1 Nordic Model: Institutional Support and Egalitarian Norms

Nordic welfare states such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland are often highlighted as exemplars of institutionalized gender equality due to comprehensive family policies, robust childcare support, and cultural norms that valorize gender equity



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(Esping-Andersen, 2009). These countries implement generous parental leave with dedicated quotas for fathers, universal subsidized childcare, and active labor market policies that support women's sustained attachment to paid work.

Research shows that fathers in Nordic countries are significantly more involved in daily caregiving and that breadwinning mothers do not face the same motherhood penalties prevalent in other contexts (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). Policy mechanisms including financial incentives, legal protections, and social norms create an environment where gender role flexibility is both feasible and socially supported (O'Brien & Wall, 2017).

### 6.2 Punjab, Pakistan: Tradition Amid Economic Shift

In contrast, **Punjab, Pakistan** exemplifies a context where strong patriarchal norms and limited institutional support constrain the acceptance of stay-at-home males and full female breadwinning. Cultural expectations that valorize male authority and female domesticity remain deeply entrenched, reinforced by religious interpretations, social sanctions, and kinship networks (Kandiyoti, 1988; Jamal & Ashraf, 2020).

Economic necessity increasingly compels women especially in lower and middle economic strata to participate in paid work, often in informal, low-wage sectors without legal protections. In these contexts, women's earnings may be essential for household survival, yet they do not necessarily translate into greater autonomy or equitable decision-making power due to persistent norms that prioritize male authority (Hadi, 2018). Meanwhile, men who assume caregiving responsibilities may face social stigma or ridicule, as caregiving is culturally framed as feminine and reflective of lower status.

Existing social support systems in Punjab rely heavily on extended family networks rather than state institutions, a dynamic that can reinforce traditional roles by expecting female relatives to assume primary caregiving responsibilities (Huq, 2020). Weak legal frameworks for parental leave, limited childcare infrastructure, and patriarchal labor markets further constrain the normalization of non-traditional roles.

## 7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite substantial research on aspects of gender roles, significant gaps remain:

### 1. Integrated Studies on Role Reversal Families:

Most research treats female labor force participation and father involvement separately, rather than examining families where both occur simultaneously. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research is needed to capture dynamic processes.

### 2. Non-Western Contexts:

There is a dearth of research focusing on South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern contexts, where economic pressures intersect with strong gender norms, producing unique patterns of role transition.

### 3. Institutional and Cultural Interaction:

Few studies comprehensively analyze how policies interact with cultural norms to enable or constrain role transitions. Comparative research across welfare regimes can elucidate mechanisms of change.

### 4. Psychological Well-Being and Identity:

More research is required on the mental health implications of role reversals, particularly in societies where stigma and norm conflicts are intense.

### 5. Child Development in Role Reversal Families:

While evidence suggests children fare well, more nuanced studies are needed to explore long-term socio-cognitive and identity development.



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### 8. Limitations

This review, as a narrative synthesis, does not employ systematic meta-analytic techniques and may be limited by the availability of studies in non-Western contexts. Additionally, much of the research referenced originates from high-income countries, which may constrain generalizability to contexts like South Asia or Africa. Greater empirical work from diverse socio-economic and cultural settings is essential for a truly global understanding of these phenomena.

### 9. Conclusion

The transition from traditional gendered family roles to configurations featuring stay-at-home males and breadwinning females reflects profound socio-economic change. Structural drivers including labor market shifts, educational transformations, and policy environments have realigned economic incentives and expanded opportunities for non-traditional roles. Yet cultural norms and institutional constraints lag behind, producing a paradox in which practices outpace acceptance and policy support.

Supporting families in transition requires multi-faceted approaches: gender-neutral policies that enable caregiving by all genders, workplace reforms that value flexibility and equity, cultural campaigns that challenge stigmas, and research that gives voice to lived experiences across diverse contexts.

By situating role reversals within broader socio-economic systems and cultural frameworks, this review contributes to understanding how gender roles evolve and how societies can cultivate greater equity within families and beyond.

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