Informal Worker Fathers' Engagement in Early Childhood Education Policies: Socio-Economic Barriers and Role Dualism

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Abstract
The involvement of informal working fathers in early childhood education is constrained by uncertain working hours and daily income, while the GAMAS and GEMAR movements demand the physical presence of fathers in schools. This preliminary study aims to describe how an informal working father in Malang Regency interprets and responds to the policy, as well as compare it with the public discourse. The study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory single case study design equipped with document analysis. The first source is six open-ended questions answered by informants via WhatsApp voicemail. The second source is eight public reports and documents, namely six public discourse reports and two policy documents, from December 2025 to July 2026. The two sources were coded based on four research focuses and compared to see their suitability and differences. The results showed that informants were able to attend when their work was flexible, but judged policies difficult for other fathers due to long working days, abrupt school information, and the assumption that fathers play a role in earning a living. Barriers to employment also appear in the public discourse, although much of the public criticism focuses on children who do not have fathers. The formal support found was in the form of dispensations for employees, not for informal workers' fathers. The study is exploratory and its findings need to be tested on more informants and social media data.

1. Introduction

The involvement of informal working fathers in early childhood education is often constrained by uncertain livelihoods. Qualitative studies in urban poor settlements of South India show that many fathers work long hours in the informal sector and view earning a living as a major role due to gender norms and economic hardship, and that missing one day of work can mean that families do not eat (Lobo et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been reported in the informal settlements of Kenya and Ethiopia, where the role of fathers is mainly in the form of financial support and minimal involvement associated with long working hours or working away from home (Owino & Yigezu, 2023). Long working hours are also associated with work–family conflicts in fathers (Cooklin et al., 2016; Li & Zerle-Elsäßer, 2023), and unemployment and workplace inflexibility are associated with higher parenting stress in low-income fathers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016).

In Indonesia, this condition concerns many families: in May 2026, informal workers totaled 87.88 million people or 59.30% of the working population (Central Statistics Agency, 2026). The government encourages the involvement of fathers through the Fathers Movement to Take Children to School (GEMAR), which was launched through the Circular Letter of the Minister of Population and Family Development/BKKBN Number 14 of 2025 as an appeal and not an obligation (Table 2, S3), as well as through the Fathers Movement to Deliver Children on the First Day of School (GAMAS) which is regulated with GEMAR in Circular Letter Number 17 of 2026 (Ministry of Population and Family Development/BKKBN, 2026). Implementation support documented in the material reviewed is in the form of dispensation for employees who follow the movement (Table 2, D1) and work flexibility for state civil servants (Table 2, D2), not for fathers who work in the informal sector.

The literature suggests that fathers in low- and middle-income countries spend less time stimulating children than mothers (Evans & Jakiela, 2025), that paternal engagement programs generally use the same structure for fathers and mothers with little adjustment for males (Jeong, Sullivan, et al., 2023), and that mother-centered early childhood programs exclude fathers (Nair et al., 2023). In Kenya, the main barriers to paternal participation are rigid gender norms and perceived opportunity costs (Jeong, McCann, et al., 2024). Evidence on paternal involvement in early childhood is also still dominated by middle-class families (Diniz et al., 2021; Diniz,

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Brandão, et al., 2023). Studies in Indonesia identified cultural norms, patriarchal culture, and time constraints due to work demands as barriers (Fauzi & Sihaloho, 2025; Ramdhini et al., 2026), while other studies reported high paternal involvement in one area or examined paternal involvement in children's learning (Bahfen et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2022). However, no studies have been found that examined fathers of informal workers in relation to GAMAS and GEMAR policies.

From this synthesis, two gaps can be seen. First, the experience of informal working fathers towards policies that require physical presence at school has not been widely documented. Second, it is not known whether the public discourse on GAMAS and GEMAR reflects the obstacles faced by informal working fathers. This preliminary study aims to describe, through a case of an informal working father in Malang Regency compared to public discourse, how fathers interpret involvement, perceive policies, face obstacles, and respond to these policies. The concept of role dualism, which is the pull between the role of the breadwinner and the expectation for fathers to be present in children's education, is used as a conceptual lens.

2. Method

2.1. Study Design

This paper is a preliminary study with a qualitative design of a single case study that is exploratory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). One case is used to formulate a proposition that can be tested, not to generalize. The case is the experience of a father of an informal worker in Malang Regency in facing the demands of involvement in his child's early childhood education. To strengthen the interpretation, informant data is compared with data from public documents and reports (data triangulation), because case studies commonly use more than one source of evidence (Yin, 2018).

2.2. Participants

The first source is one father of informal workers (hereinafter referred to as P1) who has children in the PAUD unit in Malang Regency. P1 manages his own garden and also drives for the transportation of wood without fixed working hours. P1 meets the inclusion criteria, namely (a) the biological father or guardian of the father of a child attending PAUD, (b) working in informal activities, namely self-employment, trying to be assisted by irregular laborers, freelancers, or family workers without wages as defined by the Central Statistics Agency (2026), and (c) willing to be an informant. P1's identity is kept secret and is only referred to as the P1 code. The second source is eight public documents and reports from December 2025 to July 2026 (Table 2): six public discourse reports (S1–S6) and two policy documents (D1–D2).

The research population is the father of an informal worker who has an early childhood in an early childhood education unit in Malang Regency. P1 was chosen purposively because it meets the inclusion criteria and is willing to provide information; the selection of one case follows the logic of analytical generalization, not statistics (Yin, 2018), and is influenced by the limited time of data collection. The document was purposively selected from a web search on October 26, 2026 with the keywords GAMAS, GEMAR, father taking report cards, father delivering children, and informal workers. Documents are included when they contain public responses or policy support for GAMAS or GEMAR. This corpus is not a representative sample, and systematic searches on social media platforms such as X have not been carried out.

2.3. Instrument

The main instrument is the researcher himself as is common in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), assisted by two tools. The first tool is six open-ended questions arranged based on four research focuses, namely the meaning of involvement, perceptions of GAMAS and GEMAR, barriers to work, culture, and school, and responses in daily practice. The six questions include (1) work and working hours, (2) the meaning of involvement in children's education, (3) views on GAMAS and GEMAR, (4) experiences when school activities coincide with working hours, (5) the most difficult things for fathers to attend school, and (6) things that can help fathers be more involved. An example of a question is "Have there ever been no children's school activities that clash with working hours? What do you usually do or consider at that time?". The second tool is a document code sheet that records the position on the policy (pro, con, mixed, neutral), the main issue, and whether the father's work or income is mentioned. Because this research is qualitative, the quality of the data is not assessed by psychometric coefficients, but through the credibility and traceability of the data as explained in the data analysis section.

Measurement tools. P1 data was collected through WhatsApp voicemail. Questions were sent one by one in writing and P1 answered with nine voicemails totaling about two minutes. Voicemails were transcribed verbatim, and parts using a mixture of Indonesian and Javanese were translated into standard Indonesian for citation purposes. The document data was in the form of report text and policy documents that were read and coded by the researcher. This study did not use direct observation or interviews with the school.

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2.4. Research Procedures

The collection of P1 data was carried out on October 25, 2026 in four stages. First, the researcher contacted P1 via WhatsApp, introduced himself, explained the purpose of the research, and ensured the confidentiality of identity. Second, the researcher sent six questions one by one so as not to be burdensome. Third, the researcher closed the conversation with a thank you note and asked for permission to quote the answer anonymously. Fourth, the voice message was transcribed, translated, and analyzed. The document was searched and coded in October 2026.

2.5. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in a case (within-case analysis) with a thematic approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The P1 transcript was read repeatedly, open-coded, and grouped into categories tailored to the four research focuses. The documents were coded with the same coding sheet. Triangulation was performed by compiling a comparison matrix between the P1 findings and the public discourse, and then assessing each focus as appropriate, partially different, or distinct (Table 3). To maintain the quality of the data, the researcher presented direct citations that were separated from the interpretation, treated the figures and general assessments that the informant referred to as perceptions rather than facts, marked sources with low reliability (S6, contributor opinion), and noted reflectivity. Since there was only one informant, the findings were assessed with caution and these limitations are discussed in the Limitations section.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents findings from one case (P1) and from public discourse, then interprets them by comparing the findings with the literature that has been reviewed. Because there is only one informant, the findings are read as case illustrations and not as general patterns of informal working fathers. All P1 citations are translated from mixed Indonesian-Javanese to standard Indonesian.

3.1. Results

Case description. P1 is the father of an informal worker in Malang Regency with two types of work with different working hours. When working in his own garden, P1 can leave "at any time". When driving for timber transport, P1 waits for the worker to cut the wood from the morning until it is fully loaded, then delivers it to the factory, which according to him is usually completed around 19.00. P1's findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of findings in case P1

Yes	Theme	Summary of findings
1	Involvement as learning assistance	Supporting your child's learning and continuing it at home
2	Personal abilities and father's difficulties in general	Being able to drive children because of irregular jobs, but considering GAMAS difficult for fathers in general
3	Barriers to work, school, and role norms	Long working hours while driving; sudden teacher information; father's assumption that he is only making a living
4	Trying to be present at the important moment	Work on holidays at school moments that cannot be repeated

Theme 1: Involvement as a learning assistant. When asked about the meaning of involvement in children's education, P1 emphasized the role of supporting and continuing the learning process at home: "Yes, supporting the child to learn, then applying it at home" (P1). P1 did not mention physical presence at school when explaining the meaning of involvement, but mentioned it when discussing GAMAS and GEMAR.

Theme 2: Personal abilities and fathers' difficulties in general. P1 stated that he could take his children to school because his job was not fixed: "If I were a person, I could, usually I would be the one to drive to school, because my job is not fixed" (P1). However, when discussing fathers in general, P1 considered policies such as GAMAS difficult to implement: "If such a GAMAS is now difficult for fathers" (P1). P1's answer did not explicitly state whether he had known GAMAS and GEMAR before this study, so the level of policy socialization cannot be inferred from this case.

Theme 3: Obstacles to work, school, and role norms. On the work side, P1's working day while driving is long, from morning until around 19.00, while the work in the garden itself is more free. On the school side, P1 mentions the teacher's sudden communication: "For example, work time, then the teacher suddenly gives information, it's difficult for fathers" (P1). On the norm side, P1 describes the division of roles that he observes: "In today's world, the average person who drives is his mother, takes his mother's report card, if his father is only looking for money, today it is 95%" (P1). This figure is P1's estimate and perception, not prevalence data.

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Theme 4: Trying to be present at important moments. When school activities coincide with working hours, P1 tries to take a holiday: "Yes, try to take a day off from work, because such moments cannot be repeated" (P1). P1 does not mention the impact of the holiday on income, so the economic cost of this strategy cannot be ascertained from the available data.

Public discourse. Six public discourse reports (S1–S6) in December 2025 show the pros and cons of GEMAR in various regions (Table 2). According to the author's initial coding, one report is con-consequential and five are mixed. The most common issues that arise are the psychological impact on children who do not have a father (three reports), followed by obstacles to work and father's income (two reports) and criticism that this movement is ceremonial (one report). Barriers to work are explicitly mentioned in S4, which quotes a resident who says that fathers who work as laborers, drivers, or fishermen are often unable to attend and question whether they are then considered indifferent, and in S6, which mentions informal sector workers without time flexibility and the difficulty of leave permits. Two policy documents (D1–D2) showed support in the form of dispensation for employees and work flexibility for civil servants, and the author did not find similar support for fathers who were not employees in the documents reviewed. S6 is the opinion of the contributor so its reliability is low.

Table 2. Documents and public reports analyzed

Code	Source, region, and date	Main contents
S1	- Stuart O'Neill (Scotland), National, Dec 2025	Netizens' comments highlight the feelings of a child without a father on the day of the report card
S2	Inibaru.id, Semarang, Dec 2025	Criticism of effectiveness and inclusivity (orphans, remote working fathers)
S3	Djawara News, Karo Regency, 18 Dec 2025	Residents' criticism of orphans; GEMAR is emphasized as an appeal, not an obligation
S4	BRNC, Brebes Regency, 19 Dec 2025	Criticism: working hours of laborers, drivers, fishermen; orphans; nomadic fathers
S5	Mistar.id, Toba Regency, Dec 2025	pros and cons; mother appreciates; worries in children without a father
S6	Siaran-Berita.com (contributor's opinion), Kota Tebing Tinggi, 19 Dec 2025	Criticism of being less sensitive to informal workers without time flexibility; proposed school flexibility
D1	PPID Samarinda City (policy document), Dec 2025	Appeal for employees; dispensation for employees
D2	InfobankNews, Jul 2026	Work flexibility for ASN; claims of fatherless children from officials

Triangulation. The comparison of P1 findings with the public discourse in Table 3 shows the compatibility of work hours and role norms, partial differences in attendance ability, and a different focus on policy perception, because the public discourse is dominated by the issue of fatherless children who do not appear in P1.

Table 3. Triangulation matrix of P1 findings and public discourse

Yes	P1 focus and findings	Comparison with public discourse
1	Working hours: long working days when driving; work in the garden is more leisurely	Appropriate: working hours of workers, drivers, fishermen and the difficulty of leave permits are mentioned in S4 and S6
2	Ability to attend: P1 can deliver due to irregular work	Differing partially: S4 and S6 describe informal fathers as having difficulty attending, while P1 suggests that this depends on the type of work
3	Role norms: father is perceived to only make a living, mother who delivers	Accordingly: the assumption that children's affairs are the mother's affairs are the background of this movement; S4 questions the notion that absent fathers do not care
4	Policy perception: GAMAS is difficult for fathers in general	Different focus: public discourse is dominated by the issue of fatherless children (S1–S5) who do not appear in P1
5	Response: working on a holiday at a crucial moment	Loophole: documented dispensation only for employees (D1, D2)

3.2. Discussion

P1's experience illustrates that work schedule flexibility appears to play an important role in paternal attendance. P1 is able to drive a child when his or her work is not fixed and free, such as when working in his own garden, but describes a long workday while driving. This picture is in line with the finding that long working hours are associated with work–family conflict in fathers (Cooklin et al., 2016; Li & Zerle-Elsäßer, 2023), with findings in poor and informal settlements that long working hours and working away from home limit paternal involvement (Lobo et al., 2025; Owino & Yigezu, 2023), and with the link between workplace inflexibility and parenting stress (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). Public discourse in S4 and S6 points to similar barriers. Since

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there is only one case, this can be formulated as a proposition to be tested: in informal working fathers, attendance at school is determined more by the flexibility of work schedules on activity days than by the father's will.

Role dualism can be described in three layers. The structural layer concerns time and income, which is evident in P1's long workday and in the critique of S4 and S6. The normative layer concerns the notion of fathers as breadwinners and mothers as caregivers; P1 describes it as a pattern he observes in other fathers, in line with the findings that rigid gender norms and opportunity costs inhibit paternal participation (Jeong, McCann, et al., 2024) as well as with findings in Indonesia about patriarchal culture (Fauzi & Sihaloho, 2025; Ramdhini et al., 2026). The institutional layer concerns school schedules and policy design; P1 cites sudden teacher information, and documented support (D1, D2) only touches employees, in line with criticism that paternity engagement programs are rarely tailored to male circumstances (Jeong, Sullivan, et al., 2023; Nair et al., 2023). Interestingly, P1 does not place itself in the picture of such norms, so in this case role dualism appears more as an observed pressure on the other father than a conflict experienced directly. This may reflect P1's flexible work or tendency to respond appropriately socially, and needs to be examined further.

Public discourse and P1 show different focuses. The most frequent public criticism concerns children who do not have fathers (S1–S5), while P1 highlights working hours and school communication. This difference suggests that public discourse does not necessarily represent the constraints of informal working fathers, although some reports (S4, S6) touch on them. It should be noted that GEMAR is affirmed as an appeal rather than an obligation (S3), so the pressure on informal working fathers may be lighter than imagined; this cannot be confirmed from the available data.

This case also shows a conceptual gap. Studies on paternal involvement in early childhood are still dominated by middle-class families (Diniz et al., 2021; Diniz, Brandão, et al., 2023), and work–family stress is reported to be negatively related to involvement in direct parenting in a relatively socioeconomically homogeneous sample (Diniz, Monteiro, et al., 2023). The meaning of P1 involvement, i.e. accompanying learning at home, is different from physical presence at the school targeted by GAMAS and GEMAR, and P1 seeks to be present at important moments even though the work is not fixed. Thus, physical presence at school and home learning assistance need to be differentiated when assessing the involvement of informal working fathers, and the economic costs of trying to get around work schedules are not yet known.

3.3. Implications

The following implications are conjectural ones that need to be tested in more cases. Theoretically, role dualism in informal working fathers does not appear to be uniform and can be broken down at structural, normative, and institutional layers, so the framework of role pressure and spillover between work and family needs to consider the diversity of informal work. Methodologically, subsequent research needs to use data from more fathers, teachers, and social media posts to make triangulation stronger. Practically, if supported by broader data, PAUD units can consider submitting activity schedules earlier and through channels that are easily accessible to fathers, according to the constraint called P1. This study is not enough to assess or recommend policy changes at the regional level.

3.4. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the primary data came from one informant through a WhatsApp voice message with a total duration of about two minutes, so the depth of the story was limited, the answers could not be explored further, and the findings could not be called themes across participants. Second, triangulation only used documents and public reports; teachers or heads of early childhood education, direct observation, and reconfirmation to informants have not been involved. Third, the corpus of documents is small, purposively selected, dominated by local media and opinions, and does not include primary uploads on social media such as X; coding is carried out by one researcher so that the reliability between coders has not been tested. Fourth, the P1 citation is translated from the Indonesian-Javanese mixed language so that the nuances of meaning can shift, and the answers can be influenced by the desire to answer socially appropriate. Fifth, the single case study is not intended for statistical generalization, and the GAMAS and GEMAR policies are relatively new, so the informants' experience is still in the early stages of implementation.

4. Conclusion

This preliminary study illustrates how an informal working father in Malang Regency interprets involvement in children's education and responds to GAMAS and GEMAR policies, and compares them to public discourse. P1 interprets involvement primarily as accompanying children's learning, being able to attend when work is flexible, and assessing policies as difficult for other fathers due to long working days, abrupt school information, and the assumption that fathers play a role in making a living. Public discourse touches on barriers to employment, but focuses more on children who do not have fathers, and documented formal support only reaches employees. These findings lead to the proposition that the flexibility of work schedules and the way schools communicate activities affect the presence of informal working fathers. This proposition needs to be

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tested through studies with several informal working fathers, teachers or heads of early childhood education, observations, and primary social media data, including examining the economic impact of working holidays.

Author Contributions

Alfina Nurshinta Dewi: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Pramono: Supervision. Alif Sukma Muclisin: mentor and review. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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The author states that there is no potential conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

Data in the form of voicemail recordings and informant transcripts are not shared publicly to protect informant confidentiality. Data that has been anonymized is available from the author of the correspondence upon reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The author uses Claude (Anthropic) to help draft manuscripts, search and summarize literature and public documents, draft literature reviews, draft initial coding of documents, and draft presentation and discussion of findings based on data collected by the author, and use Grammarly to improve spelling and grammar. All sources, code, and citations are double-checked by the author, and the author is solely responsible for the content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions. The AI tool is not listed as the author.

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Appendix

List of documents and public reports analyzed (Table 2). Dates that contain only months are estimated from the news age description at the time of search, October 26, 2026, and need to be double-checked on the source page.

S1. Kompasiana. (Dec 2025). Pros and Cons of the Fathers Movement to Take Report Cards to School (GEMAR). https://www.kompasiana.com/literasiazka/6946770b34777c75f011d782/pro-kontra-gerakan-ayah-mengambil-rapor-ke-sekolah-gemar

S2. Inibaru.id. (Dec 2025). The "Gemar" policy and the challenges of fathers' involvement in children's education. https://inibaru.id/senandika/kebijakan-gemar-dan-tantangan-keterlibatan-ayah-dalam-pendidikan-anak

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