

# Stay-at-home fathers in Singapore: 3 key observations for policy makers

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A new study by Yvonne Arivalagan, Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, explores how stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) in Singapore, a slowly but steadily growing group, perform a role that is relatively new and unfamiliar to them.

Based on data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 SAHFs and nine spouses, it was possible to glean three overarching insights for policy makers:

## **1. Why couples choose specific parenting roles: Economic reasons and parenting ideologies**

For 19 out of 21 fathers interviewed, the decision to become a SAHF emerged out of necessity rather than any preference to embrace fatherhood as their primary role or identity. Five SAHFs had children with physical or intellectual disabilities, which required one parent to be a full-time caregiver.

One respondent had quit his job due to health issues. Others arrived at the decision to stay at home due to high levels of personal or work-related stress.

However, the most important factors for a couple to choose specific parenting roles were economic circumstances and parenting ideologies. Most respondents assumed the SAHF role due to difficulty in finding employment or having a spouse who earned a higher and more stable income.

Many also strongly believed that a parent should be the child's main caregiver, and did not have favourable views on grandparents, childcare centres or foreign domestic helpers as alternative sources of childcare.

**Implications for policy makers:** This speaks to an economic rationale, as opposed to a social or gender-ideological one, behind some couples' decisions to not only opt out of the dual-income model, but decide on the father as the primary caregiver.

## **2. Masculine parenting: Skills learned and developed by SAHFs for their new, unfamiliar role**

Among the varied strategies employed by SAHFs to successfully perform their roles was the desire to maintain a sense of purpose, productivity and usefulness.

By seeking ways in which they could continue to feel useful around the home, be it by maintaining the discipline to run household affairs, setting personal goals, or through positive self-affirmation, respondents reinforced the centrality and importance of "usefulness" to their core identities.

A deeper reading of these statements points to the economic demands placed on parents, particularly fathers, to earn a sense of self-worth through performing tasks that are of economic or tangible value and benefit to others. The respondents' language also implies that being a stay-home parent and the care and household work associated with it may be seen as inherently less "useful" than paid work.

In defining their roles within the household and as parents, many respondents alluded strongly to the qualities typically associated with traditional ideals of masculinity through the use of descriptors such as "protector," "provider," "leader," "brawn," "daring," and "power." Respondents also differentiated their roles from women's roles in the household.

**Implications for policy makers:** Many respondents experienced acute stigma from family members, friends, coworkers, neighbours and strangers. Respondents' coping strategies toward this stigma are important in understanding how SAHFs define and negotiate their identity and role, and why many respondents emphasised masculinity and usefulness as part of their identities.

### **3. Powerful cultural scripts prevent SAHFs and bread-winning mothers from fully embracing their roles**

Many SAHFs downplayed the value of fathers relative to that of mothers in terms of caregiving. Many expressed the view that their wives, and women more broadly, were more naturally suited to caregiving than men and were therefore superior even to stay-at-home fathers in performing this role.

When probed further on their views, many respondents pointed to biological reasons, such as childbirth, behind women's natural predisposition and advantage compared to men in caring for children.

However, deeper analysis revealed that there could be two alternative reasons for this characterisation of "proper" parenting roles. Firstly, some respondents alluded to a guilt they felt at depriving their wives of the chance to spend time with their children. One respondent often referred to women's innate, biological desire to connect with their children as a "checkbox" that had to be filled.

Secondly, many respondents spoke of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority at performing their roles as fathers and caregivers compared to women.

One respondent's use of the phrase "no matter how much a father has done, a child will always need mother, because we have different modes of care and love" (emphasis mine) implies that mothers are able to provide a more fundamental and primary form of care and love compared to fathers and not simply one that is "different."

**Implications for policy makers:** While some wives felt positive about being their family's primary breadwinner, others spoke about feeling "burdened" in the role. They described the stress and pressure they felt to perform well at work, while framing staying at home as an "opportunity" or a "luxury" they did not have.

Female respondents' emphasis on concepts like the "burden" and "stress" associated with being a sole breadwinner could furthermore be contrasted against their husbands' more

accepting attitudes toward the role. One SAHF described being the sole breadwinner as an “alien concept” for his wife.

This divergence between male and female attitudes toward being the sole breadwinner reflects the unfamiliarity and dissonance that some female breadwinners may experience in fulfilling their roles.