

The case for more paternity leave

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AT THE recent National Day Rally, the Government announced bold steps to make Singapore a more conducive place for couples to raise children. These included plans to provide paternity leave as well as helping companies implement better work-life balance practices.

More egalitarian child-rearing is an important pre-condition for women to feel comfortable to have more children. So the value of paternity leave is immense and cannot be side-stepped, despite the difficulty it poses to employers.

Paternity leave, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned, was a policy change the Government is looking to adopt despite its previous reservations.

While many have applauded this move, employers have already raised concerns about the policy shift. This is partly because a disproportionate number of key positions in the workforce are filled by men. Their temporary absences from work - for longer periods than what is required currently, such as for national service obligations - can amount to substantial disruption, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises.

But Singapore would not be the first to implement paternity-leave legislation. A number of Western societies have embarked on paternity leave as part of their reforms targeted at ensuring replacement-level fertility rates. Norway and Sweden have had such policies for about two decades. Despite their very generous maternity-leave policies, many European countries have not mandated more than token paternity leave.

Women's hesitation about having larger families today includes their concern that a large part of child-rearing will ultimately fall back on them.

Performing the "second shift" is an onerous burden that few women volunteer for. The traditional division of labour, with men as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers, is no longer tenable, with most women keen on remaining employed even when they have children.

Greater gender equality for child-rearing is required. This is not easily achieved at home since patriarchal culture is well-entrenched in our conservative society.

For men to become genuinely involved in child-rearing, research has emphasised the importance of early bonding when their child is an infant.

This encourages men to see themselves as involved fathers. Their early involvement also increases their skills and confidence as fathers, besides reducing the possibility of mothers unconsciously assuming the main role in caring for the child.

When mothers take on such a role, maternal gate-keeping may set in, where women negate their husband's efforts in childcare by constantly showing dissatisfaction with

their performance. Such disapproval tends to impede men's future participation in child-rearing.

Even when enlightened men want greater involvement in the formative stages of their children's development, the corporate world does not view their domestic responsibilities seriously. The working world assumes women run the domestic sphere.

Paternity leave symbolises a change in the strict demarcation of gender roles. Paternity leave should represent the aspiration of modern fathers to be as involved in their child's development as their spouses. If paternity leave is to be taken seriously, it cannot be just symbolic - men must receive more than a few days of token leave. In Europe, the more common policy structure has been to allow fathers and mothers to share in the total parental leave so as to increase gender equality. Beyond stipulating a short leave for women to recuperate after delivery, the bulk of childcare leave can be shared. Unpaid childcare leave and flexible workload arrangements can be offered to both mothers and fathers.

However, research has shown that despite allowing men to engage in child-rearing, the uptake for childcare leave among men will be low unless there are incentives. In Spain, only two per cent of eligible fathers apply for parental leave.

Those who do tend to be employed in family-friendly work environments - clear evidence that men are sensitive to employers' negative sentiments about their leave-taking.

The reluctance of men to share in such leave has been best tackled in Norway and Sweden, where "daddy months" have been legislated, currently 12 weeks in the case of Norway and eight weeks in Sweden.

The paternity quota of parental leave, if not consumed, will not be transferred to the mother. This encourages fathers to use this provision.

Data from a number of Western countries suggests that men who utilise their paternity leave are more involved in their child's development.

An Australian study, however, adds caution to these findings. Amanda Hosking and her colleagues, writing in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, found that the level of cultural, institutional and workplace support for men's involvement in childcare influenced whether paternity leave would result in greater paternal involvement.

Hopefully, the first step to overcome some of these structural challenges will commence when Singaporean fathers obtain something more than token paternity leave.

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