

Give dads more work at home to boost birth rates

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A common perception is that fathers in Singapore do less child-rearing and housework than mothers. In the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) Survey on Social Attitudes of Singaporeans 2013, more than half of female respondents indicated that they spent more time on household chores and caregiving than their spouses did. Only 3 and 4 per cent respectively of male respondents said they did more household chores and caregiving, compared with their spouses.

Should men be blamed for this imbalance? Not if we go by their intentions. In a National Population and Talent Division survey in 2012, almost all respondents of both sexes supported shared parental responsibility. Another study by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2013 found that 86 per cent of unmarried respondents felt that both partners in a marriage should share familial responsibilities (financial contributions, housework and child-rearing) equally.

Why then are women still primarily, or even solely, responsible for affairs of the home, instead of this role being shared fairly by couples?

The answer could lie in the continued prevalence of patriarchal norms in our society. Men may feel pressured to position themselves as the main breadwinner so that they are not viewed as feminine. They may worry that their employers would judge them as less dedicated to their work if they take on tasks such as picking up children from school or going on grocery runs. Despite society becoming more enlightened, there are still women who consider care work as a female-only domain. They may refuse their spouse's participation, thus perpetuating what sociologists term the "gendered division of labour". This is where individuals are assigned tasks deemed suitable for their gender, relying on socially constructed notions, such as men being better workers and women being better caregivers.

Findings from the Perceptions of the Marriage & Parenthood Package 2013 survey, published last Monday by the Institute of Policy Studies, offer hope that attitudes towards men helping out at home are changing.

The survey found that women whose husbands took paternity or shared parental leave - schemes which were introduced in the Marriage and Parenthood Package 2013 - were more likely to feel that the schemes had an influence on their decision to have children.

The survey, conducted between July and September last year, polled 2,000 married Singapore residents aged between 21 and 49 years. Only 187 of these respondents had used one or both leave schemes. From these respondents, over six in 10 women whose spouses had used paternity leave and over five in 10 women whose spouses had used shared parental leave felt that the schemes would influence their child-bearing decisions. In contrast, only four in 10 women whose spouses did not use either paternity or shared parental leave felt the same way.

From these findings, we can infer that women who may have initially been sceptical of their husbands' inclination or ability to take on care work at home changed their minds after they experienced their husbands taking paternity leave or shared parental leave.

Men who had utilised the leave schemes also felt that the schemes played a part in a couple's decision to have children.

We can extrapolate further from these findings and say that women could be motivated to have (more) children if they felt that their husbands would share more responsibility within the household. Can fathers thus be given a chance to demonstrate their ability to play a bigger role in caregiving and housework? While couples are best placed to discuss the apportioning of familial responsibilities early on in their marriage, the state can help to encourage this conversation.

Fathers now get combined paternity and shared parental leave of two weeks compared with mothers' 16 weeks (of which, one week can be shared by the father), which perpetuates the notion that women should bear the bulk of child-rearing responsibilities. I had suggested in a previous media commentary in March, available on the IPSCOMMONS website, that the last eight weeks of the government-funded maternity leave can be converted into shared parental leave. This can be flexibly consumed by either parent within 12 months of the child's birth.

With this option, couples would have to discuss the issue of how to share the role of caregiving for a newborn child as well as other domestic responsibilities.

Such a move may not be that radical, given our insights into how Singaporeans are, in principle, supportive of shared familial responsibility, particularly with regard to parenting.

There are several benefits to men playing a larger role at home. First, it may persuade women that they can have families and still play a role in the workforce. This may go some way towards reviving Singapore's flagging total fertility rate. Many mothers are now better educated with career aspirations and desire to return to work after childbirth. Giving them the option of sharing their full quantum of maternity leave with their husband could facilitate their re-entry into the workforce.

Second, research studies have shown that the infant's early months mark a crucial period for the father to bond with the child while learning and acquiring confidence in childcare. In a study published in 2012 in the *Journal Of Child Psychology And Psychiatry*, researchers at the University of Oxford found that children who had quality interactions with their fathers at a young age had fewer behavioural problems as they grew up. The researchers studied 192 families recruited from two maternity units in Britain, assessing the child at the age of three months and again at the age of 12 months.

While there will be couples who prefer to preserve the current gendered division of labour, there should be the option of a fairer partnership to better accommodate the changing needs and aspirations of couples in Singapore. Encouraging a new normal in familial roles could perhaps go some way to nudging (more) couples to have (more) children in the future.

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