“Stay-at-home” fathers and their families: What lessons for policymakers?

Yvonne Arivalagan
Research Associate
Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

sppypa@nus.edu.sg

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores how stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) in Singapore, a slowly but steadily growing group, negotiate and perform a role that is hitherto relatively new and unfamiliar to them. Based on data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 SAHFs and 9 spouses, it was possible to glean three overarching insights.

Firstly, economic reasons and parenting ideologies surpassed gender-ideologies in choosing parenting roles. Few SAHFs actively chose to become their children's primary caregiver, but rather assumed the role out of economic necessity and a preference to raise their children without external support. As the traditional, gender-essentialist alignment of household roles and gender ideologies is disrupted as women's employment and earnings rise, SAHFs adapted to these shifting circumstances through economic reasoning and a desire to be active and involved parents.

Secondly, despite not choosing to become SAHFs, many respondents learned skills and strategies over time to perform the role successfully and in a manner that was apparently "masculine" and "useful" to their family. The salience of masculinity was strongly evident among respondents, who articulated their roles and identities as SAHFs using language resonant with conventional and socially desirable ideals of masculinity, such as physical strength, leadership and power. Some respondents assembled new and alternative typologies of masculinity, instead highlighting traits such as adaptability, resilience and calmness in stressful situations. Many also differentiated their roles from those performed by women or mothers. Many respondents also emphasized the ways they sought to be "useful," productive and purposeful in their roles by adding value to their family members' lives.

Thirdly, powerful cultural scripts in Singapore prevent SAHFs and breadwinning mothers from fully embracing roles that they, due to economic or practically advantageous reasons, have decided to perform. Despite successfully performing their respective roles, many SAHFs continued to accept a subsidiary parenting position relative to their wives while breadwinning mothers continued to strongly value and prioritize motherhood. The SAHF-breadwinning mother model is hence not a total reversal of the conventional male breadwinner-female caregiver model, as traditional gender ideologies continued to have a place among a majority of respondents.

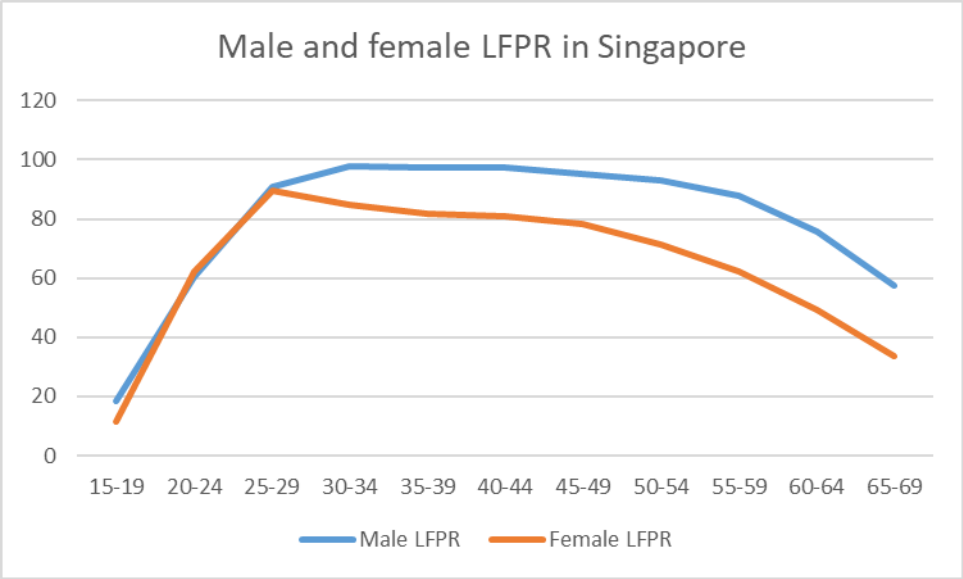
PURPOSE OF STUDY

Demographers have observed that greater gender equity in the home, especially in economically advanced countries, is more likely to lead to higher fertility rates. McDonald (2000) noted that very low fertility in advanced countries is the outcome of a conflict or inconsistency between higher gender equality in individual-oriented institutions like democracy, education and employment and sustained gender inequality in family-oriented social institutions. He argued that higher gender equity in the family is necessary to avoid low levels of fertility. Using data from 1975 to 2008 for over 100 countries Myrskylä et al (2011) found that countries ranking high in development as measured by health, income, and education but low in gender equality continue to experience declining fertility. They suggest that gender equality is crucial for countries wishing to reap the fertility dividend of high development. Observing a reversal in the downward trend in fertility in countries like Norway and Demark, Castles (2002) found that the greater the availability and accessibility of employment opportunities for women and the weaker the voices telling women that work and family are incompatible, the more likely it is that the birth rate will be relatively high.

Singapore's TFR in 2018 was 1.14, the lowest in the country's history and among the lowest in the world (DOS, 2019). That same year, 286,600 female Singapore residents outside the labour force cited housework, childcare and caregiving to family members/relatives as their main reason for not working. In comparison, 15,400 men were outside the labour force for the same reasons (MOM, 2018). The Singapore Panel Study on Social Dynamics further found 77% of household heads working full-time who were the main caregivers of

young children were women (NUS, 2019). In other words, women are much more likely than men to bear the dual burden of employment and childcare. Research on the "motherhood penalty" also shows that female labour force participation (LFPR) begins to decline around their late 20s and early 30s, when marriage and childbirth are most likely to occur (Anderson et al, 2002; Budig & England, 2001, Kuziemko et al, 2018). There is evidence for this in Singapore, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Male and female LFPR in Singapore



Source: Department of statistics, Singapore. 2019.

There is therefore resounding evidence to suggest that a major contributor to Singapore's ultra-low TFR is sustained gender inequality in the domestic sphere. The importance of gender inequality as a factor in low fertility, combined with the dearth of research on this subject, particularly on men's attitudes toward childcare and household work was the main rationale behind this study.

Stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) were chosen as research subjects for this study due to their deep involvement in childcare and household work. This is a form of extreme case sampling, where studying participants with unique or special characteristics can lead to valuable insights on the general population. Extreme sampling can be useful in identifying previously undiscovered factors and determining how exceptional cases emerge – positive exceptions can provide suggestions for ideas to adopt while negative exceptions can identify options to avoid (Gerring, 2006; Reilly, 2000). Thus, the experiences of SAHFs were deemed to hold valuable insights on successful fathering practices, the impact of active fatherhood on other family members, how fathers in Singapore negotiate their identity, and other relevant policy areas.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the context presented above, my central research question is as follows: How do stay-at-home fathers in Singapore negotiate and perform a role that is hitherto unfamiliar to them and what insights about fatherhood, parenting and household work can be drawn from these exceptional cases?

INSIGHT 1: ECONOMIC FACTORS AND PARENTING IDEOLOGIES SURPASS GENDER IDEOLOGIES IN CHOOSING PARENTING ROLE

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. 5 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, economic circumstances and parenting ideologies remained pivotal in most respondents' decisions to become SAHFs. 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.

This speaks to a powerful economic rationale, as opposed to a social or gender-ideological one, behind some couples' decisions not only to opt out of the dual-income model, but decide on the father as the primary caregiver. Historically, economic circumstances and gender ideologies were more closely aligned, with men earning more than women and considered to be better suited to wage work than domestic responsibilities. Today, however, these notions of gender essentialism — the belief that men and women are suited to different tasks and social roles — are being disrupted by new economic realities. As women's earnings increase, the belief that women should assume the role of the stay-home parent is becoming less straightforward than it was in the past. Findings from this study show that economic reasoning plays a predominant role in helping families adapt to these changing circumstances.

A majority of respondents did not consider grandparents, foreign domestic helpers or childcare centres to be ideal sources of childcare, preferring instead for a parent to be a child's primary caregiver should economic circumstances allow it. Together with economic factors, parenting ideology was another pivotal factor behind respondents' decisions to become SAHFs rather than seek external support.

This is a surprising finding given the prominent role elderly persons in Singapore perform as caregivers for their grandchildren. There are also policies such as the grandparent caregiver relief to support working mothers who engage the help of their parents, grandparents, parents-in-law or grandparents-in-law to take care of their children. Grandparents are also deeply valued as care providers in Singaporean culture (Chan, 1997; Göransson, 2010; Mehta, 1999).

However, respondents observed that as Singaporeans marry and have children later in life, grandparents too become caregivers at a later age. They noted that the declining mobility, energy and overall physical health of their parents may not suit them to the often strenuous task of caring for young children. Many respondents also brought up the notion of a generation gap and the ways their approaches to childcare differed from their parents, particularly in terms of values they hoped to impart to their children. This even led to some stress and conflict in some households. Thus, while policy support and time convenience enabled some families to appoint grandparents as their young children's primary caregivers, it was not be the ideal or preferred arrangement for many respondents.

Respondents were also not agreeable to the "mass setting" of childcare centres as well as their approach to disciplining children. Many respondents were cautious about the effects of institutionalized childcare on their children's personalities and development, which they preferred to shape instead. Thus, even while childcare is being subsidised and made more accessible in Singapore, it was not the preferred option for some respondents who preferred to raise their children on their own terms.

As was the case with grandparents and childcare centres, respondents in this study revealed that FDWs are not considered to be ideal sources of childcare provision, particularly in terms of nurturing a child's values and personal development. When afforded the "opportunity" to stay at home, largely due to having a spouse earning a higher and more stable income, many respondents were further compelled by the desire to care for and raise their children themselves rather than seek external support. Many respondents clearly considered parental care to be vital in raising children. Seeking external childcare support was thus seen as a sub-standard alternative given the time constraints of wage work.

INSIGHT 2: "MASCULINE PARENTING": THE LEARNED NATURE OF PARENTING AND SALIENCE OF "USEFULNESS" AND "MASCULINITY" IN SAHF'S PARENTING STYLES

The experience of stay-at-home fatherhood enabled many respondents to develop skills and adaptive strategies to successfully perform a hitherto unfamiliar role. Many developed and espoused strong parenting philosophies over time and gained confidence from witnessing the positive impact of their involvement on their children's development. Many respondents also articulated their new identity using positive self-affirmation – in particular by emphasizing the "useful" and conventionally "masculine" aspects of fatherhood and by distinguishing their roles from mothers' or women's' roles. These can be partially attributed to the stigma that many SAHFs continue to face in Singapore, from family, friends, coworkers and strangers.

The learned nature of parenting

A major finding of this study is that when fathers experienced the transition to parenthood in a way that was structurally comparable to motherhood, fathers began to think about and perform parenting in ways that are similar to mothers (Rehel, 2014). Notably, many respondents developed strong parenting philosophies regarding how they wished to raise their children and the values they wished to imbue in them. Many respondents developed these approaches to parenting after assuming the role of primary caregiver to their children and gained confidence in and mastery over parenting tasks over time. A core element of these approaches was a sense of attentiveness and responsibility, defined by scholars as learning the cues, needs and patterns of children's behaviour (Bobel, 2010; Miller, 2007; Walzer, 1998).

During interviews where children were present, the interviewer observed how respondents paid attention to their children's behavioural cues, such as restlessness, agitation or gesturing, and responded accordingly by feeding, talking to or entertaining them.

The opportunity to experience the transition to parenthood without the demands and constraints of wage work provided fathers the space to develop a sense of attentiveness and responsibility that is often positioned as a core element of mothering (Fox & Worts 2009; Hays 1996; McMahon 1995; Ruddick 1995). The extended period of time respondents had with their children also enabled them to actively engage in parenting in a self-directed way rather than relying on their partner's guidance. The skills developed by SAHFs over time furthermore challenges the popular perception of the naturalness of mothering by highlighting the hands-on, learned nature of parenting (Lamb 2004).

Many respondents also expressed fulfilment at having been able to shape and witness their children's emotional and intellectual development. Seeing their own qualities, especially confidence and emotional security, reflected in their children seemed to be particularly rewarding for respondents.

Desire among SAHFs to feel "useful"

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 neoliberal 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.

Salience of masculine identity among SAHFs

The continued salience of masculinity was apparent in how respondents coped with and adapted to their new roles as SAHFs. Through describing and delineating the roles they performed in the household and with regard to parenting, many respondents retained a strong association with traditional ideals of masculinity, while others assembled new, more fluid conceptions of masculinity to adapt to shifting economic and social realities.

Traditional ideals of masculinity

Raewyn Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful framework with which to understand how respondents performed and made sense of their roles as SAHFs in Singapore. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the "pattern of practice" that "embodies the currently most honored way of being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It is constructed both in relation to the dominance of men over women but also in relation to various subordinated masculinities. It is closely associated with authority and social power and serves as the norm and standard by which other forms of masculinity are measured and evaluated.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is historically and culturally contingent. While literature on the subject in a Singapore context is sparse, studies on fatherhood in Asian countries like Hong Kong and Japan suggest that breadwinning remains a dominant source of masculine identity for the majority of men (Liong, 2017; Yagi, 2009). Broader typologies of hegemonic masculinity in a contemporary, albeit largely Western context, include qualities such as physical strength, courage, willingness to take risks, decisiveness, logic, leadership and protectiveness (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

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.

New and alternative ideals of masculinity

While some respondents associated their roles with traditionally desirable masculine qualities, others assembled new and alternative typologies of masculinity that instead centered on traits like calmness in stressful situations, adaptability and resilience.

One respondent's self-assessment as being "not too emotionally attached" to change mirrors the view of other respondents who emphasized their ability to manage challenges in a "logical" as opposed to an ostensibly "emotional" manner that they more closely associated with their wives. For this respondent, his adaptability to changing economic circumstances that necessitated that his wife remain in full-time employment was viewed as a strength and an advantage that suited him to the SAHF role. Traits such as adaptability, calmness, and indeed resilience when faced with shifting social and economic realities were thus shown to be highly valued by SAHFs and treated as an apparently more "masculine" approach to managing challenges.

SAHFS and division of household labour

The salience of masculinity was further reinforced in the ways SAHFs defined the division of domestic labour. Interestingly, several respondents employed a full-time or part-time foreign domestic helper to perform daily household chores such as cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping. Some were assisted by their mothers or mothers-in-law in performing similar household tasks. Several respondents drew a distinction between these forms of daily household chores and tasks like cooking and parenting.

Some respondents took pride in their interest and skill in cooking. They drew fulfilment from the high standards they held to home-cooked food and the creative aspects of cooking and menu planning, over mundane or routine chores like cleaning, folding clothes or purchasing groceries. Scholars like Berk (1985), Brines (1994), South & Spitze (1994) and West & Zimmerman (1987) have put forth a theoretical construct of "doing gender", noting that in married households, couples enact their "proper" gender roles through the amount and type of housework they perform. Bianchi et al (2000) further observe that women are disadvantaged in household tasks by spending more time on "the least attractive housework activities" like cleaning and laundry. This gendered division of household labour was apparent through interviews with SAHFs in Singapore, some of whom employed foreign domestic workers (FDWs) to perform housework. Some respondents' decisions to hire a domestic helper to perform housework despite having available time to do so themselves reflects the persistence of gender differentiation in housework in Singapore households.

However, the gendered division of household labour was diminished when it came to parenting, which many respondents described as "gender-neutral." Some respondents clearly distinguished the "biological" aspects of childcare such as breastfeeding, from the social dimensions of care which they deemed gender-neutral. This finding is consistent with the previous observation that many SAHFs found meaning in and adapted to their roles through the parenting philosophies they espoused and the positive traits they nurtured in their children. Unlike housework, which a number of SAHFs outsourced to FDWs, parenting was regarded as an activity that had the potential to traverse prevailing gender norms. Reinforced by the skills and confidence developed by many respondents over the time they spent as SAHFs, this finding again challenges the perceived natural superiority of mothering by emphasizing the hands-on, learned nature of parenting (Lamb, 2004; Rehel, 2014).

Stigma experienced by SAHFs and coping strategies

Many respondents experienced acute stigma from family members, friends, coworkers, neighbours and strangers. Respondents' coping strategies toward this stigma are important to understand due to the insights they offer on how SAHFs define and negotiate their identity and role, and indeed why many respondents emphasised masculinity and usefulness as part of their identities. Manifestations of stigma ranged from directly derisive comments to indirect and implied criticism of the respondents' roles as SAHFs, often from their in-laws.

Notions of "wasting" one's potential or "mooching" from their wives were prevalent in the comments directed to respondents from family members, particularly parents-in-law. This reflects the strength of cultural norms that dictate the appropriate roles for men in society and further reinforces the ideology that the value of fatherhood does not counteract the value of being a breadwinner in Singapore. Respondents' parents-in-law were also likely to doubt their ability to adequately provide for their daughters if they were not earning a stable wage.

The importance of professional achievements as components of men's identities and self-worth was also evident in respondents' interactions with their friends and other social circles. Some respondents also used terms like "invisible" and "unregarded" in describing how they perceived others' attitude towards them as SAHFs. A sense of social isolation and displacement was clearly perceptible here, as SAHFs recalled reactions ranging from confusion to a lack of interest or regard from others. Respondents' familial roles outside the realm of wage work were deemed irrelevant and insignificant, which could also reflect a wider devaluation of parental responsibilities in Singapore.

Many respondents also spoke of a sense of distrust and suspicion they perceived from coworkers. A lack of support from employers and coworkers was a common concern for respondents. One respondent's recollection of being deemed a "troublemaker" and "troublesome" by his employer conveys a sense of inconvenience and burden felt by his employer due to his decision to be his child's primary caregiver. Another respondent's experience with coworkers who were unable to believe he was a full-time caregiver further

reflects the social expectation placed on fathers to contribute to their families by means of wage work rather than through caregiving at home.

To cope with such reactions from others, many respondents looked inward rather than seeking external support. Many re-evaluated their identities and practiced emotional self-regulation to successfully perform their roles. For one respondent, the continued salience of masculinity as part of his personal identity was a clear response to societal expectations of men to provide for their families primarily through "hunting" or breadwinning. Another respondent underscored the importance of having a "strong sense of purpose" while a third respondent recognized the need to remain "connected" to the professional world even as a SAHF. These coping strategies suggest that respondents' emphasis on masculinity and "usefulness" is a result of society's disrespect, disregard or distrust of SAHFs. Many respondents negotiated and compensated for the tension they perceived between the roles they performed and the roles expected of them by society through emphasizing the ways they remained "masculine" and "useful" in an economic or professional sense even as SAHFs.

INSIGHT 3: POWERFUL CULTURAL SCRIPTS PREVENT SAHFS AND BREADWINNING MOTHERS FROM FULLY EMBRACING THEIR ROLES

Despite employing strategies to adapt to and succeed in their new 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. This reflects the persistent salience of biological essentialism in legitimizing the differences between mothers' and fathers' parental roles in Singapore despite evidence to the contrary.

An initial reading of responses suggested that SAHFs possibly shirk their household and parenting responsibilities by elevating the capabilities of their wives over their own. This is plausible as many respondents hired domestic helpers or sought the assistance of their mothers or mothers-in-law to perform household chores and to an extent, provide physical care to their children such as bathing and feeding.

However, deeper analysis revealed that there could be two alternative reasons for this characterization 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. He further expressed guilt at performing a role that his wife clearly desired more than he seemed to. In describing his wife's "struggle" at being absent from their child's first milestones and contrasting it against his own less "intense" feelings, it is plausible that his use of biological essentialism stems from an attempt to rationalize this guilt and hence safeguard what he believed to be a role most ideally suited to and desired by women.

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." This seems to rank modes of care along a hierarchy, with maternal involvement placed at the top, rather than a spectrum. Furthermore, respondents' recognition that their children often chose or needed their mother despite their own deep involvement as SAHFs indicated their belief that parenting cannot solely be performed by fathers. One respondent frankly stated that since childcare was something women could do "much better," it made little sense for fathers to even make the attempt. However, when examined in the context of many respondents' deep involvement in

raising their children and the fulfilment they derived from witnessing their children's intellectual and emotional development, these statements instead seem to be made to protect themselves from a perceived ineptitude or failure. For many SAHFs, the rewards of parenting did not seem to be commensurate with the effort.

By alluding to an inexplicable special quality that mothers seem to have and downplaying their parenting skills against their wives', many respondents were seen to have lost trust and confidence in their own abilities. This seemed to have a self-fulfilling effect as many respondents then also accepted a subsidiary role when it came to parenting, reinforced by feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Impact on wives

The impact of having a stay-at-home spouse on wives was varied. Many wives felt supported when husbands shared or took on a greater share of childcare and household work. Many also felt free to concentrate on their careers and earn a stable income for their family. However, several wives also highlighted the "burden" of breadwinning and some respondents observed that the inputs of working mothers in the household domain were often "non-zero."

Impact on emotional wellbeing of wife

Many wives described feeling a great sense of "relief" when supported by their husbands, particularly in providing care for their children, which was shown to be a major source of stress and anxiety for many working mothers. Some had even undergone a depressive period prior to their husband's decision to stay at home and consequently experienced a significant improvement in emotional state.

Numerous studies, including several in Singapore, have documented the postnatal depression experienced by many women (Chee et al, 2005; Cox et al, 1982, Kumar & Robson, 1984; Ong et al, 2015). Terms used by mothers interviewed in this study like "meltdown," "snap" and one mother's vivid metaphor of a "withering" tree closely resemble many of the symptoms of postnatal depression, such as stress, anxiety and labile emotions. The support of a husband, particularly in caring for children, was seen to be a tremendous source of relief and comfort for many working mothers interviewed.

"Burden" of being a female breadwinner

However, 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. In contrast, male respondents' expectation to be the family's breadwinner better prepares them to assume and get accustomed to the role and identity. One SAHF also indicated that this dissonance has led to marital conflict over each partner's "proper" role.

"Non-zero" inputs of working mothers with stay-at-home spouses

The "burden" felt by breadwinning mothers can be further explained by the observation that even working mothers with stay-at-home spouses tended to take on a disproportionately large share of household work and

childcare. This “non-zero” input of working mothers ranged from doing household chores and worrying often about their children to turning down opportunities at work in service of motherhood.

Hays’ (1998) theory of intensive mothering is a relevant lens through which to analyse these statements. Intensive mothering is described as a child-centred, emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the child and in which children's needs take precedence over the individual needs of their mothers. Some female respondents’ preoccupation with and belief that they “needed to do more” and one respondent’s “mindful and careful” decision-making around her role as a working mother are reflective of the social expectations produced by the intensive mothering ideology, even in SAHF households. The pervasiveness of the intensive mothering ideology in Singapore and the support it receives from influential social agents like the state, childcare experts and popular culture has been documented in several studies (Straughan et al, 2007, 2008). Cultural ideologies thus strongly promote expectations of an involved and present mother in Singapore even where there is significant support from a spouse. Deviating from these expectations, ostensibly through being a breadwinning mother, clearly produced feelings of guilt, inadequacy and possibly other mental health repercussions among female respondents.

On the other hand, working fathers tended not to internalize these expectations even when they are equally responsible for childcare and thus experience less guilt than their partners, leading to what Hays (1998) termed the “guilt gap.” One father’s view that working fathers could “stay away completely” from childcare while SAHFs engaged in “co-parenting” rather than “full-time” parenting reinforces the notion that even SAHFs play a subsidiary or at most, an equal rather than primary role in parenting relative to mothers. The subsidiary role of fathers in the household is a theme that has emerged elsewhere in this study. The embeddedness of the intensive mothering ideology in social and cultural expectations of women’s parenting roles in Singapore thus actively marginalizes fathers’ parenting responsibilities - a self-fulfilling and mutually reinforcing dynamic.

Even as women’s education and earnings in the workforce have increased over the decades, this study has shown that some women may continue to feel “burdened” as their family’s sole breadwinner and experience guilt and inadequacy over not being involved mothers. This finding clearly demonstrates that powerful cultural and gendered scripts can prevent individuals from assuming and taking ownership over roles that may be practically or economically advantageous and even lead to conflict within and between married individuals over what one’s “proper” role should be.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policies could more closely reflect predominance of economic reasoning in choosing parenting roles

Presently, family policies in Singapore strongly signal that childcare is a woman’s responsibility. At sixteen weeks, maternity leave in Singapore is far more generous than the two weeks of paternity leave available to fathers. The Grandparent Caregiver Relief is also given to working mothers who engage the help of their parents, grandparents, parents-in-law or grandparents-in-law to take care of their children. Working fathers are not eligible for this relief and are thus doubly isolated from the domain of childcare – first as a caregiver, and second in terms of organising external childcare support.

These heavily gendered policies reinforce notions of “proper” roles for men and women in Singaporean families even as shifting economic and social realities disrupt the traditional, gender-essentialist alignment of household roles and gender ideologies. This study has shown that, in the presence of changing circumstances, families predominantly use economic reasoning to choose parenting roles. Thus, family policies in Singapore could better afford individuals the opportunity to choose roles that are practical or economically advantageous based on their personal circumstances, while diminishing signals that differentiate household roles by gender.

Further research on this subject could replicate a study by Wilson and Hantula (2016) to determine the economic value of maternal care versus paternal care. The researchers asked close to 500 participants in Norway and the United States how much a mother would need to earn to allow her husband to stay at home to provide childcare and how much a father would need to earn to allow his wife to stay at home to provide childcare. The premium that individuals place on maternal versus paternal care in Singapore would be useful in determining the relevance of social norms on household specialization over time and in the context of changing economic realities.

Importance of time in developing paternal skill and confidence

Findings from this study have demonstrated the hands-on and learned nature of parenting. SAHFs who experienced the transition to parenthood in a structurally similar fashion to motherhood developed the skills and confidence needed to raise their children. One respondent observed that the present entitlement of two weeks' paternity leave was not sufficient for fathers to contribute significantly to childcare:

> "It's simply not enough. If you look at Scandinavia, you're talking about a year. You're talking about a significant amount of time, which in my experience, based on my parental experience, you kind of need that six months, one year. One week, two weeks, please lah… why bother? You see my sense is, unless you're fundamentally investing time and effort for a stretch of time right, it's just a vacation. You're not helping materially."

Based on this respondent's experience, the under-utilisation and uncertainty around the usefulness of paternity leave in Singapore can be directly linked to its limited availability. Time was a crucial factor for him and many other respondents to "invest" fundamentally in childcare and be able to contribute significantly as a parent. The length of paternity leave can hence be seen as a direct predictor of its impact on paternal involvement. Evidence from this study is thus hoped to strengthen the imperative behind increasing paternity leave in Singapore.

Elevate status of fathers through policy support and communications

A father's status as his child's caregiver should not be outweighed by grandparents, childcare centres or foreign domestic helpers, particularly when these external sources of support may be seen as not ideal, and even harmful, but unavoidable due to economic or time constraints. Fathers should receive similar, if not greater, levels of support as do these alternative sources of childcare. Parental involvement should also be strongly encouraged in the first few years of a child's life, with equal support given to mothers and fathers. Not only could greater paternal involvement at home address the declining female labour force participation after childbirth, it could also give fathers the opportunity to specialize and more efficiently perform childcare and household work over time.

From a policy communications perspective, it will be important to introduce the principle of how being a father and caregiver is not emasculating and furthermore remains a "useful" and purposeful activity. Conventional markers of masculinity such as physical strength, leadership and power, but also new and alternative typologies of masculinity that centre on calmness, adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges can be used in public campaigns to encourage active fatherhood in Singapore. Parenting could also be framed as involving a spectrum of roles that can be fulfilled by both parents equally well, rather than a hierarchy of tasks that mothers have a natural advantage in performing.

As noted by one female respondent, the psychological impact of becoming a caregiver is greater for men than it is for women, many of whom have been conditioned and socialized toward accepting caregiving responsibilities in the home.

> "I think for the men, it's more of the psychological thing. I think generally men, compared to women, they are emotionally weaker. So if it's over an extended period of time, I think more importantly it is how they manage their own mentality, the, you now, the outlook of things in general, because once they get a bit emotional or affected by you know…comments or things that are happening at home or outside, because you know…people will start to compare between you and your guy friends, people who are doing well and then versus you, so to you, what is doing well? So you need to have your own definition of what is successful…to you as a stay at home dad."

The psychological barrier to becoming a primary caregiver may be more pronounced for men than it is for women due to differing social expectations that continue to be placed on men and women. Thus, policy signals that elevate the importance of fathers in their families and support fathers in their decision to be actively involved parents would be a significant step towards encouraging active fatherhood in Singapore.

Consider extending exclusive, non-transferable paternity leave instead of shared parenting leave

The dissonance and tension that respondents felt over performing roles that were deemed not wholly suitable or appropriate for them suggests that shared parenting leave provisions in Singapore may not have the intended effect of encouraging and supporting shared parental responsibility. Findings from this study showed that even SAHFs accepted a subsidiary role in parenting relative to their wives due to gendered ideological and social norms. Similarly, a 2010 study by McKay and Doucet titled "Without taking away her leave" found that Canadian fathers deferred to mothers in making leave decisions, thus reproducing a gendered dynamic where mothers were regarded as the "owners" of parental leave.

Further research can be conducted on how parents negotiate shared parental leave in Singapore and if mothers are indeed seen as the "owners" of parental leave and thus largely determine how the leave is to be shared. If this is the case, the shared parental leave policy could counteract efforts to encourage active fatherhood. Instead, exclusive and non-transferable paternity leave can be considered as a signal that fathers too have a responsibility and role to play in childcare, without necessarily taking away from a mother's entitlement.

Workplace practices

Increasing paternity leave to a period of six months, for instance, could be more advantageous for employers than the current entitlement of two weeks. Introducing a paternity cover policy where a temporary employee or contractor is hired for a six-month period while a staff member is on paternity leave could minimize gaps in output during a staff member's absence and can furthermore be planned for in advance.

As noted by one respondent:

> "Depending on your job, we would have to find someone to try and cover you or do your work, enough of your work so it's caught up. Two weeks is not enough of a gap. If it was longer, then okay, someone can cover you. You could apply in advance so management could work it out. Because depending on your job, maybe you can't leave, it'll affect your employment, your status, you can't attend this meeting or this conference and that might have a big effect on your earning power. Those two weeks might be anywhere in the year."

Such an arrangement could also create employment opportunities for those looking to switch careers or take on temporary or contractual work. Paternity cover practices presently take place in countries like Australia, Canada and Denmark and even in some Singapore-based multinational companies like Facebook. The same would apply for a maternity cover policy, which is already practiced by many employers in Singapore.

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