

# Cherish more leave for dads, even if it doesn't push up the birth rate

Employers and society must also change mindsets if the latest initiative is to truly work.

**Kalpana Vignehsa**

At his maiden National Day Rally speech on Aug 18, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced that government-paid parental leave (GPPL) in Singapore would be increased from five months to around 7½ months. As someone who lives and breathes all manner of data pertaining to families in Singapore, this policy announcement and the subsequent reactions have left me both jubilant and troubled.

Research into child development emphasises the importance of parental involvement in the first 24 months of a child's life. So I am thrilled that many parents will now be able to significantly lengthen the time they are primarily involved in their infant's care. I was also deeply moved by PM Wong's eloquent and emphatic pitch for fathers to take on their fair share of the domestic duties involved in caring for their families.

Given my work, I take this as a sign that this Government is serious about making ours a more family-friendly society. But it bothers me that employers do not seem on board. Their reactions suggest that, even though it is the Government that is picking up the tab for the extra parental leave, they are uncomfortable about letting their workers avail themselves of it unconditionally.

The reluctance of fathers to take parental leave further muddles the complex story about why we are having fewer babies – one that has gender relations at its core.

Data that my colleagues and I collected in the Singapore Perspectives 2024 survey found that 40 per cent of women between 21 and 34 years old do not foresee themselves getting married. This group is 17 percentage points less interested in marriage and 12 percentage points less hopeful for children than their male peers.

The best interpretation of the data appears to be that, for more young women than young men, their stumbling block to marriage is gender relations, rather than the childrearing that often goes along with it.

However, what this analysis shrouds is that gender relations do not exist in a vacuum.

In modern-day Singapore, an intense neoliberal logic interacts with how gendered norms of caregiving play out. We have started interrogating what is happening between men and women but don't spend enough time thinking about how the system shapes those interactions and what we stand to gain if we change what we choose to prize.

And it is from this kernel that my troubling thoughts have bubbled since Aug 18.

## MARRIED TO THE JOB?

First up, some groups representing employers have been calling on employees who

plan to take this enhanced parental leave to be understanding of their colleagues who will be expected to shoulder a greater load and to be flexible and ready to step back in should there be emergencies.

The language used is reasonable – who wouldn't want to help out in an emergency or understand that their team might have to step up? – but it masks the discomfort that many are recognising these days: Your employer wants you to devote yourself to your job in the way you would devote yourself to your family.

While those of us who are lucky enough to love our work may feel some dedication towards our employer, would it be reasonable to expect to be on-call if our organisation wasn't paying us?

The Government has not put any onus on employers to foot the bill of parental leave and will be responsible for the generous payments of up to \$2,500 per week per parent.

So this means that employers need not pay you while you are on parental leave and can instead use what would have funded your salary to creatively address some of the labour gaps created by you taking parental leave.

They can, for example, hire people in parental leave cover positions, as is common in countries where mothers and fathers commonly take long periods of parental leave. I had the privilege of hiring my own cover when I was working in Australia, before taking 12 months of paid and unpaid parental leave.

The longer the leave period normalised, the easier to create an industry of parental leave cover positions.

For shorter-term absences, employers can consider setting aside the funds they save towards bonuses for team members who are picking up the slack. This would go a long way towards keeping misgivings between team members at bay, and truly assuage any anxiety the leave-takers may feel about what they rightfully owe their organisations when they are on leave.

Internationally, there are many examples of economically vibrant companies that deal with the leave and flexibility needs of parents as a matter of course.

An acceptance that long parental leave is a worthy cause that we should creatively work around to accommodate is the difference-maker. We now need more eloquent and emphatic calls for this in Singapore.

## TIME FOR DADS TO STEP UP

The second stone in my proverbial shoe is that we are still a society that is far more comfortable with women taking parental leave, as opposed to men.

In 2022, just under half of all fathers didn't feel like they could ask for the leave or that they should take the leave. Yes, women have obvious physiological reasons for needing the leave, but there is a wealth of research building the strong case that infants benefit from their fathers being closely involved in their care.

I am also puzzled about the perspective of employers on this



matter. In 2024, most women who are 40 and under are likely to feel that they are just as valuable to their organisations as their male counterparts and that their organisations are fully aware of that.

So, why then, when we expect women to equally share responsibilities in the workplace, do we think it would be sustainable for them to be primarily responsible for childcare and home care? Why are we less on board with fathers taking paternity leave?

With the new employer-mandated paternity leave and provision of 10 weeks of shared parental leave, it seems that our Government has begun to internalise the importance of fixing this misalignment.

However, I cannot help but wonder if there's a missed opportunity here.

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Some Nordic countries implemented this as they saw uneven parental involvement in childcare as a key stumbling block to their own population growth. Like them, we also have heavy female labour market participation, making shared parental responsibility fundamental to whether it makes sense for women to be willing to have more children.

Indeed, many of these countries first equalised paternity leave, before offering shared parental leave that was available for those who had used their individual allocations. The result has been that even if mothers commonly take more of the shared leave, the norm is that each child experiences being primarily cared for by their father for a significant period in their infancy. And parents continue to more evenly share responsibilities in the long term, shoring up equitable career development and retirement adequacy in the process.

One concern with the new policy is that, given paternity leave is so underutilised, many mothers will end up using the entire portion of shared leave, bringing their total share to 26 weeks, while their partners take no leave, or four weeks at most.

Of course, in some families, it will make sense for the breastfeeding mother to take a larger portion of shared parental leave. But in others, it will make sense for the mother who earns a higher wage to return to work sooner.

And it seems a missed opportunity by the Government to not structure the changes in a way that validates both these permutations as equally acceptable. If families stood to lose leave if fathers didn't take their share, it would quickly be understood that almost all employees, regardless of gender, would be utilising the parental leave available.

On this issue, social conservatives champion choice. They say that it is better that

policy not dictate how couples share parental leave. However, the Singapore Government has not shied away from using public policy to incentivise culturally desired outcomes.

So, if we recognise that a more equitable sharing of parenting duties between men and women is essential because it is fairer for women, good for the well-being of men and children, protective of marital relations, and makes childrearing more attractive, then we should boldly use the shared leave enhancements as a lever, incentivising couples to make such choices.

## A MEANINGFUL PRIZE

Both these concerns are about what we value in our society. Can employers and colleagues grow to see parental leave entitlements as something necessary and good, and become willing to make periods of leave workable for all?

Can a father's care be finally recognised as being vital to his babies and nourishing to himself? Such a father is almost certainly benefiting from strengthened relationships with his partner and children in the long term.

Indeed, even the way we obsess over how these parental leave enhancements will affect the total fertility rate (TFR) obscures the true value of these changes.

It is wrong to think that if the TFR does not rise, these policies have failed. The TFR has been declining in almost all advanced economies and success may involve these enhancements stabilising the TFR or slowing its decline.

The actual promise of this policy direction is that it enshrines support for parents to be more closely involved in the early childhood years of the next generation.

That is an end worth backing.

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