

News analysis

Paternal leave has doubled, but do fathers dare take more of it?



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Around a decade ago, some employers in Singapore fretted that their businesses would screech to a halt, thanks to a tidal wave of new fathers being granted paid time off to look after their newborns.

Singapore at the time was mulling over compulsory paternity leave. While parents cheered, employers were worried about how such leave could affect their operational and manpower needs, especially in smaller companies and male-dominated industries.

Eventually, in 2013, a week of government-paid paternity leave was introduced. In 2017, this was doubled.

On Tuesday, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced that this would further go up to four weeks. This applies to fathers of Singaporean children born on or after Jan 1, 2024, and will be implemented on a voluntary basis for a start.

Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore, told *The Straits Times*: “It sends a message to Singaporeans that fathers have the right, not just responsibility, to enjoy spending

time with their newborns like mothers, and that they can play a critical role in children’s development.”

Citing her findings drawn from SG Leads (Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study) data, Prof Yeung said that paternity leave improves family dynamics by reducing conflict and increasing mothers’ marital satisfaction, among other positive outcomes. SG Leads is a large-scale nationally representative cohort study on children’s early development.

“Previous studies also show that when fathers are more involved in childcare and housework, couples are more likely to have a child or have another child. So, the new policy may have a positive impact on fertility rate too,” she added.

But how much this change will lead to a real shift in men contributing more to childcare duties depends on several factors.

GETTING BUY-IN FROM COMPANIES

For one thing, the ball is in employers’ court.

The Public Service, Singapore’s largest employer, will take the lead to increase paid paternity leave from two weeks to four weeks, starting from Jan 1, 2024.

In the private sector, one of the first to boost its leave policy for fathers is insurer Prudential Singapore. Ms Sheela Parakkal, its chief human resources officer, said on Wednesday that it will provide four weeks of paid paternity leave from Jan 1, 2024.

It has since 2017 given three weeks of paid paternity leave, which is more than the mandated

two weeks. Its female staff can take 24 weeks of paid maternity leave, more than the compulsory 16 weeks.

“We recognise that fathers are playing a bigger role in child-raising and are keen to use their paternity leave to bond with their child. At Prudential, we are committed to helping our people get the most out of life. One way is by supporting our colleagues in taking the time they need to be part of their child’s growth and share parental responsibilities,” said Ms Parakkal.

Still, the National Population and Talent Division’s (NPTD) consultations with companies show that there is general uneasiness among some smaller businesses about allowing their male employees to take a longer period of paternity leave, or letting them go on such leave at all.

The pressures of a tight labour market and challenging economy make it harder for such firms to make up for the prolonged absences of staff.

Companies are also grappling with changes they need to make with the shift towards flexible work arrangements, as the Government continues to urge them to be open to such requests.

Mr Wong said as much in his Budget speech on Tuesday, that the extra two weeks of paternity leave is voluntary first, in order to give more time to employers to adjust, especially taking into account existing economic conditions, as well as manpower and operational challenges.

The coming months will give a cushion to firms that are still on

the fence to make the necessary adjustments, as the extended leave kicks in only for babies born from January 2024.

WORKERS WHO PRIORITISE FAMILY ARE NOT LAZY

Another issue is whether fathers face any hidden barriers – be they gender stereotypes or workplace pressures – that deter them from taking time off.

Currently, only about half of fathers in Singapore take paternity leave, according to the NPTD.

Associate Professor Vincent Chua of the National University of Singapore’s department of sociology and anthropology said: “We need employers to be enlightened, not to penalise workers who have decided to prioritise family as being somehow unmotivated and less committed to their work.”

He noted that working mothers have for a long time borne the brunt of such perceptions and treatments, otherwise known as the “motherhood penalty”.

“With longer paternity leave soon to be implemented, employers need to be careful that a parallel fatherhood penalty doesn’t arise, which may evolve into a more general parenthood penalty – that anyone, mother or father, who wishes to be actively involved at home pays a price at work,” said Prof Chua.

MEN IN LABOUR-INTENSIVE JOBS TAKE LESS PATERNITY LEAVE

What’s more, differences across jobs, income and educational levels may be at work.

Prof Yeung’s study showed that fathers in families with higher household incomes were more likely to use their paternity leave. Those who were more highly educated – with post-secondary education and beyond – were also more likely to take the full two weeks of paternity leave than those who did not complete secondary school.

Her study also found that fathers who hold labour-intensive jobs, such as machine operators and cleaners, were significantly less likely to take the two-week paternity leave, compared with those who were legislators, senior officials or managers.

This could be a result of factors such as an unsupportive work culture, or employers who discourage them from taking leave to avoid having fewer workers on hand.

Other possible reasons could be that such workers have strong patriarchal social norms and do not feel that caring for children is a man’s job.

Prof Yeung said: “We need to pay special attention to this group of fathers and work with their employers to incentivise them to allow fathers with newborns to take leave.”

“(We should also) inform these fathers of the benefits of spending time with their partners and children, and encourage them to take paternity leave.”

More could be done to convince small and medium-sized enterprises and businesses in certain sectors of the benefits of giving their employees time off for family. These include lower attrition rates and increased

productivity and motivation at work.

Fathers, too, need to be educated on the importance of their involvement at home, particularly in their children’s development in the early years. It also sets the stage for more egalitarian parenting arrangements and improved marital satisfaction.

The provision of four weeks of paternity leave and four months of maternity leave, though, is just a start.

Raising a family takes serious commitment in terms of time and energy, said Prof Chua.

“There is an overarching tension that characterises the spheres of family and work that needs to be reconciled,” he said, adding that employers must not view families as a threat to work productivity.

“With companies, firms and businesses, the urgency of profit-making displaces, paradoxically, the important work of reproducing a society for the generations,” said Prof Chua.

“The truth is that families and workplaces need each other. But families have often been sacrificed on the altar of more work, productivity and economic growth,” he added.

There may be more paternity leave on the table now, but whether it is used or not is still a big question mark. Society, including employers and co-workers, must still first debunk age-old gender stereotypes about caregiving – and work towards a culture that supports families’ needs.

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