

Experts, dads: Seven days paternity leave isn't enough

When his son was born 10 weeks ahead of schedule in 2014, necessitating him to be in an incubator for some time, Mohd Izad Misri became the tiny infant's whole world for almost two months.

The IT worker was the parent who touched and comforted the baby boy every day, bringing frozen breast milk to sustain him until his mother had recovered enough to visit him.

"I saw him during my lunchtime. I (had to) take a two hour lunch time. Normally it's one hour but I spoke to my boss who gave me relief for two hours," he told Bernama via Zoom.

He took two weeks off so he could help his wife – who was alone at home recovering – cooking and cleaning for her until she was strong enough to do it herself. He also took time off when he had his other children a few years earlier.

All his days off came from his annual leave as Malaysia did not recognise paternity leave for workers in the private sector then. Only civil servants had a seven-day paternity leave allotment. Dads in the private sector, however, had to take either a week or two off from their annual leave or unpaid leave to be with their wives.

All that changed last month when the Dewan Rakyat approved amendments to the Employment Act, guaranteeing working fathers in Malaysia at least seven days of paternity leave per child for up to five children, regardless of the number of wives. The fathers must have also worked at the company for at least 12 months to be eligible for paternity leave.

The Dewan Rakyat also approved an amendment to increase maternity leave to 98 days from 60 days in the case of private-sector employees and 90 days for civil servants, in keeping with International Labour Organisation recommendations.

Gender equality

While he is glad that Malaysia is now granting seven-day paternity leave, Mohd Izad thinks the number of days allotted was too few.

"One week is not enough. During the second week (after delivery), the wife may not be strong enough to take good care of herself," he said.

While experts laud the 98-day maternity leave, they agree the seven-day paternity leave is barely enough to cover the needs of new parents. They, nevertheless, said it is still progress, stressing that it should only be an opening salvo leading to longer and more equal benefits for fathers. The ideal would be something close to what developed countries such as Canada or the European Union provide – months of parental leave shared by both parents.

"It's progress because it's from zero to seven days but it's still quite unsatisfactory," said Professor Dr Noraida Endut, director of the Centre for Research on Women and Gender at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

"Parental leave gives a better deal for parents, especially in terms of bonding with children, and it also encourages fathers to be more involved in childcare – it's actually a better outcome for the family."

Studies have found that women whose husbands take paternity leave are more likely to return to work and increase their income. As such, women's rights and labour groups, such as Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) and Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), have been working on getting working fathers in Malaysia paternity leave for years, saying it would help create a more balanced workforce.

However, it was only in 2015 when the government seriously started considering paternity leave.

Noraida said part of the issue was that Malaysia was not fully prepared to provide more equal leave for both parents due to the outdated mindset of gender roles and childcare, where men are the breadwinners while women are expected to take full responsibility for childcare and child-rearing.

The statistics bear these out, with the **Department of Statistics Malaysia** recording women's participation in the economy at 55.3 percent, one of the lowest in Southeast Asia. Subsequent research has found a number of these women dropped out of the labour force after having children.

WAO deputy executive director Yu Ren Chung, who has been fighting for a seven-day paternity leave since 2015, said it is important for fathers to play a role from the very beginning of a child's life to not only help out the child but also help the wife to recover and prepare to return to work.

"Family care is the biggest issue and the reason why women get out of the workforce, unable to join even if they wanted to. We need to do something to change this mindset and really kind of break down these gender stereotypes that have led to situations where women have less economic freedom," he said.

He added that the authorities should work on providing fathers with more paternity leave, saying many wanted to be more involved in their children's lives from the start.

Some employers, especially small- and medium-sized enterprises, are also unable or reluctant to provide their male employees with longer paid paternity leave. A WAO survey in 2020 found that the husbands of 257 women with children surveyed were either not allowed to take paternity leave or received less than a week off.

But this will likely change if companies wish to attract and retain quality staff, including encouraging women to return to the workforce, according to human resource consulting firm Randstad.

Randstad-Malaysia head of operations Fahad Naeem told Bernama there was a talent shortage in Malaysia, with more skilled staff needed in the IT and manufacturing sectors dealing with automation and artificial intelligence.

He said women are a key part of the workforce in all organisations, adding that excluding them from the labour force due to child-raising issues would end up impacting the economy.

"If men and women are given the same benefits when they are giving birth or raising a child, if they can divide the responsibilities at some point, it can counter the problem and you could have those women back in the workforce as well," he said.

Family benefits

Paternity leave is especially important in this day and age where one can no longer depend on having extended family members to help out with childcare.

"The kind of family we have now is very nuclear. We no longer can rely on extended family to take care of mothers recuperating after childbirth. We don't have a lot of access now to maids, for example," said Noraida.

As such, she said it was crucial for men to take longer paternity leave to help their wives recover.

Clinical psychologist Lee Kuan Shin said another aspect of having the husband at home post-childbirth is to safeguard his wife during the recovery process.

"Some women go through postpartum blues. It does help to have someone around to share the load, to share the emotional overload," she said.

In some cases, the blues develop into postpartum depression, which Lee described as sadness persisting beyond three weeks. Some symptoms include anxiety and irrational and suicidal thoughts. Lee said it would be good to have someone by the mother's side during this time to give guidance, help her adjust to the baby and seek help when needed.

"It'll be nice to have another person just to share the load. It also demonstrates to the children that you can actually have both parents be in a partnership," Lee said.

Studies have found that women are less likely to develop depression within a year of giving birth if their husbands took paternity leave.

Children are also less likely to develop mental health issues. Research has found that fathers adapt hormonally to care for their young children, meaning the biological effect is not reserved for women alone.

Research shows that men who get involved in child-rearing from the beginning are likely to be more involved for years to come. They also found that children with involved parents tend to be happier.

Lee added that mental health issues usually stem from poor communication. Having both parents be involved usually meant they could create a space where children could communicate openly with their parents.

"If a child is able to trust somebody, to tell his or her issue even at a young age, we can foresee the person growing up to have better communication, a better way of coping with the issues because they know how to reach out," she said.

Mohd Izad can attest to that, feeling that the time spent bonding with his children in their earliest days created a closeness that would be hard to replicate if he had missed those days.

He told Bernama his children, the oldest being 12, would seek him out if they have problems.

"I can tell you that I'm their favourite. Their mom can be a bit cranky," he said, laughing. – Bernama

<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/family/2022/04/25/experts-dads-seven-days-paternity-leave-isn039t-enough>