

Paternity leave plan labelled ridiculous by gender equality campaigners

Campaigners ask: why would the government agree to three days off for new fathers when it already grants its own civil servants five days?

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Su-mei Thompson of The Women's Foundation says the city has far to go to catch up with other developed economies. Photo: David Wong

The government's proposal to give new fathers three days' paid leave when it already grants its civil servants five days' paternity leave has been condemned as absurd by a group campaigning for gender equality.

"Civil servants have five days ... when I say it's ridiculous, I am asking why should the private sector have only three days," said The Women's Foundation's chief executive Su-mei Thompson.

Under the proposal, new fathers would enjoy three days off on 80 per cent pay. The plan has yet to go before the Legislative Council but was given the thumbs up by the Labour Advisory Board at the end of November after a lengthy debate involving unions and business leaders.

"It was a good first step but it was not bold enough. [Hongkongers] have started to realise the importance of the father in parenting ... but we hope Hong Kong can carry on with the discussions," said Thompson.

According to the city's labour laws, a woman is eligible for 10 weeks' maternity leave during and after her pregnancy.

Thompson said Hong Kong still had a long way to go to match the family-friendly work environments that are the status quo for many developed economies.

"In an ideal world, we would like the discussion to be reframed as parental leave [instead of maternity and paternity leave], so that either the mother or the father can choose [the amount of time off]," she said.

In some Scandinavian countries, she said, parents can choose how to divide leave.

In Sweden, for example, new parents qualify for shared parental leave of up to 480 days.

According to a Swedish government website, men claimed about 20 per cent of total parental leave taken in 2008. In a bid to advocate better gender policies, meanwhile, the foundation is offering scholarships to one Hong Kong university graduate every year to study gender issues at Cambridge University's Centre for Gender Studies.

"The talent pool of skilled researchers in Hong Kong is very small for those who understand gender issues and can apply the best practices in gender analysis.

"We hope that after their studies, students can come back to work in public administration, research or media," she said.

Thompson also called for the advertising industry to get rid of gender stereotyping.

"In traditional advertising, when you try to sell a car, the dad would drive the car and the mum would be doing the housework. But in some countries, there is more advertising that portrays the reversal of those roles," she said.

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Paternity leave plan Labelled ridiculous