

As a global city, Hong Kong must do more to support its working parents

Su-Mei Thompson says we need better policies, and an attitude change that prioritises family

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Working parents who desire more meaningful involvement in their children's lives should be applauded, not shamed. Photo: Felix Wong

Working parents who are exhausted from trying to "have it all" should take heart. Hong Kong's statutory maternity leave has b

een strongly criticised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for lagging behind international best practice, while statutory paternity leave comes into effect in March.

However, while legal rights to parental leave are important - changing the mindset of employers and employees - particularly those working at small and medium-sized enterprises - to view parental leave positively is an arguably more important yet difficult achievement.

Hong Kong has a ferocious work ethic and it is generally assumed that, thanks to extensive support available in the form of domestic helpers and extended family members, working parents can, for the most part, delegate much of their childcare responsibilities and focus totally on their job. These factors have shaped our statutory and organisational policies.

Working mothers are expected to return to work after 10 weeks, despite the fact that the International Labour Organisation recommends a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave, based on considerations of maternal health and infant well-being. From March, new fathers will be entitled to (just) three days of paternity leave.

Pregnancy discrimination cases comprise one of the two main categories of employment-related complaints lodged with the Equal Opportunities Commission, under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (the other being sexual harassment). Women are fired after becoming pregnant or after having a baby because of perceptions that their commitment to work has declined, and/or because employers balk at the prospect of providing maternity pay.

Cultural attitudes that see workers as ideally being available 24/7 must be changed. Additionally, working parents who desire more meaningful involvement in their children's lives should be applauded, not shamed.

Meanwhile, there is tremendous scope, and an urgent need, for the government and the private sector to work together to reduce the financial burden on employers, especially SMEs, of supporting maternity and paternity leave. This is significant because women make up a large share of SME employees, especially in the services sector.

According to the ILO, over 100 countries now support maternity leave cash benefits through the public purse or compulsory social insurance schemes. Between 1994 and 2014, globally, employers' direct liability for financing maternity cash benefits fell from 33 to 25 per cent. In Mexico, for example, the government subsidises the maternity social insurance scheme on top of employers' and employees' contributions.

Governments are also helping SMEs cope with indirect costs by simplifying administrative procedures, or helping them manage potential cash-flow shortages when benefits are only later reclaimed from the state or social insurance.

We hope the government will urgently review funding models used elsewhere which are also appropriate for Hong Kong. There is significant scope for the many leading insurance companies operating in the city to help the government arrive at innovative private-public maternity insurance arrangements.

Concurrently, more organisations should consider how maternity and paternity leave and active parenting can be cast in a more positive light for employees and their managers and colleagues.

For instance, when someone goes on maternity leave, this can be positioned as an opportunity for other colleagues to take on new or expanded responsibilities, allowing for enhanced professional and personal development.

Framing parental leave as a gender-neutral issue also recognises that many men want to be more involved with their family.

In addition, more organisations are also using coaches or other external resources to help employees going on maternity leave make the transition positively, navigate the change in their identity, re-engage with stakeholders and key clients on their return, explore different childcare options and alternative work patterns, and set clear boundaries between work and personal space. There are many ways firms can create more supportive environments for working parents.

Raising a family is a social good and a cherished goal for many people, but the reality is that pregnancy and maternity are especially vulnerable times for working families.

As a global financial centre, Hong Kong should be in line with international standards for family welfare. It is time we broadened minds and accelerated action to ensure that Hong Kong men and women can become parents while retaining their livelihoods, dignity and ability to provide for their families.

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