

# Time is ripe for 'second half of gender revolution' in Asia

The first gender revolution sent women into the workforce, reducing marriage rates. The next half under way in Europe and America will come to Asia, when societies value educated mothers and involved fathers.

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Increased involvement by men with children and housework has been called the "second half of the gender revolution", with the first half being the dramatic increase in women's participation in the labour force.

In the first stage of the gender revolution, women who were highly educated and working were less likely to marry and have fewer children. As gender norms in society changed, research has found that, in the 1990s, in the United States and some European countries, women who were better educated and had higher income became more attractive marriage partners, and men who had more egalitarian gender norms also became more attractive partners, and more likely to be married. Evidence in many countries shows an increase in men's housework and childcare time since the 1960s.

Fathers who are more invested in childcare are less likely to become divorced. There are also findings that more involved men are happier with their marriage and have more sex.

In Asia, gender norms have been slower to change, and this reversal of relationships has not been observed in most societies here, although there is some evidence in Korea and Japan that fathers' involvement in housework and childcare has contributed to better marital relations and a higher chance of a couple having a second child.

In addition to impact on marriage and fertility, studies using longitudinal data have shown that fathers' time involvement with children has unique contributions – over and above that of the mothers' – resulting in children's better school performance and fewer behavioural problems.

For example, paternal warmth and the quality of father-child relationship are positively related to a child's quality of life. One recent study found that time the father spent in supervision, especially at meals and in organised activities, is associated with less cigarette smoking in late adolescence.

**THE LONG ARMS OF A FATHER**  
I have been involved in research

based on over a quarter of a century's longitudinal data in the US collected from about 5,000 families annually between 1968 and 1995 in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. This research has found that some of the fathers' attitudes and behaviour are related to children's early adult outcomes in education and work.

For example, precautionary behaviour of a father to ensure his children's safety and financial security while children were young, measured with indicators such as wearing a seat belt, having car insurance, and savings, is related to a child's higher education attainment and wage rates in early adulthood.

This effect is stronger for sons than for daughters, suggesting a stronger paternal role in reducing the generally riskier behaviour in sons than in daughters.

The father's attendance at religious services when a child is young is found to be beneficial to his children's years of completed schooling.

More highly educated fathers spent more time with children, shared more housework, and spent more time on community activities, an indicator of family social capital.

Furthermore, highly educated fathers often marry better educated women, and such couples spend more time and money on their children. This could contribute to an increasing divergence of development between children from different socio-economic statuses.

Studies also found that in the US, there are differences in the fathers' involvement by race. Societies can encourage men's involvement at home for all socio-economic and ethnic groups to avoid a widened inequality in intergenerational transfers.

#### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In addition to encouragement from family members and communities for fathers' involvement, many countries have implemented various family-friendly policies such as paternity leave to help fathers achieve a better balance between work and family.

Partnership between government and the private sector to encourage male employees to get involved in raising their children will be most beneficial to help strengthen families. The move last year by Swedish furniture retailer Ikea to offer month-long paid



paternity leave to its employees in South-east Asia, including Singapore, is an exciting example.

Belgium and Luxembourg were the first two countries to introduce paternity leave entitlements in the 1960s. Today, about two-thirds of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries have such entitlements.

In recent years, East Asian countries have started to offer paternity leave and to reform workplace structures and shift mindsets about gender roles. While in Europe the initial aim had been more to promote gender equality, in Asia the motivations are more to maintain population sustainability, given the declining marriage and fertility rates.

Research shows that Asian men identify more strongly with their breadwinner role and that long work hours keep many of them from spending more time with their children. Despite the equally

high participation of women in the labour market in Asia, Asian fathers are found to be less involved in childcare and housework compared to their Western counterparts, and provide less emotional support. Measures to enable fathers to play a bigger role in their children's lives will help strengthen families.

#### MORE LEAVE AND MORE INCOME REPLACED

Countries vary in the amount of paternity leave and levels of compensation. Some are more generous, offering long durations of paid leave and high levels of income replacement.

This first group includes economies such as Finland, Germany, Iceland, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Others providing shorter paternity leave but with high income replacement include Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece,

Hungary and the Netherlands.

A third group, providing short or minimal paternity leave with low or no income replacement, includes Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, South Korea, Poland, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. Finally, countries such as the United States provide no statutory paternity leave.

Out of all these economies, Iceland has developed one of the most effective, innovative and targeted leave systems. It mandates for companies to provide a nine-month paid postnatal leave that can be divided into three parts – a three-month non-transferable leave for the father and mother respectively, and another three-month leave that both parents can draw on.

The family's financial compensation is as high as 80 per cent of the last drawn salary on average. There is also a 13-week unpaid parental leave each parent

can draw on each year.

Providing paternity leave is one thing, but how do we encourage fathers to take it and spend more time with their newborns? Studies show that fathers are most likely to take paternity where they have the highest levels of support. Dads in countries that provide longer durations or/and higher income replacement of paternity leave are more likely to take it.

Valuing family time, their children's development and gender equality have motivated fathers to take time off. It also seems that offering them more money allows dads to feel they're still financially supporting their families, even with their children at home.

While families are sensitive to a "use it or lose it approach", financial security seems an important factor affecting the decisions of dads to take leave. In places that do not mandate companies to provide paternity leave, like the US, dads who have a higher level of education and higher-income jobs are more likely to take leave.

Japan and South Korea have some of the world's most generous paternity leave entitlements. One year of paid leave is available for new fathers, but very few dads take advantage of it because the practice is culturally frowned upon.

#### BENEFITS TO THE FAMILY

Based on studies in Australia, Denmark, the UK and the US, fathers who take leave to spend time with their family – whether paternity, parental or annual leave – are more committed to the family at the child's birth.

Fathers who take leave, especially more than two weeks, are also more involved in their child's care on a sustained basis, even after the first year. Many say they value the chance it gives them to develop a closer bond with their children.

Countries like South Korea have taken other steps to change the culture in order to improve the take-up rate for paternity leave, including passing a Framework Act on Healthy Families in 2004 that prioritises work-family balance, building family-friendly environments and establishing healthy family support centres and family-friendly workplace programmes.

One hopes that by reforming the workplace, more Asian fathers will be able to spend more time with their families. But culture does not change overnight.

The take-up rate for paternity and daddy care leave in Europe increased only gradually. Deep-seated traditional gender norms and values remain strong in Asia, where patriarchy and intergenerational hierarchies are powerful forces that shape fatherhood and behaviour.

The public and private sectors need to work together to help change family and work culture so that the second half of the gender revolution will arrive in Asia, too, to help turn the tide of ultra-low marriage and fertility rates in countries such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore.

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