



ONE FOR THE GUYS

Changing hats

by Stephanie Caunter

Pardon the slang, but men really do get a bum rap sometimes. I'm referring to the double standard that society practises when it comes to working fathers. On the one hand, gender diversity advocates are saying they want their husbands/partners/fathers to play a more hands-on role in childcare and household matters. But when men actually try, they get nasty remarks flung at them from all quarters.

Take the recent incident of American baseball player Daniel Murphy. When his first child was born, Murphy took his entitled three-day paternity leave (which is really a pittance when you think about it) to spend time with his wife and newborn. The criticism he got for missing the start of baseball season was loud and uncalled for.

One sports broadcaster infamously commented, "You're a Major League Baseball player. You can hire a nurse to take care of the baby if your wife needs help."

Words almost fail me at this point. Could it be that society's attitude towards men and childcare is that men should provide the monetary support for their children to be taken care of, but under no circumstance should they demean themselves by actually taking part in cleaning, feeding or putting their child to bed? Perhaps that's a tad far-fetched, but we obviously still don't give men much credit for wanting to play their part as a parent.

Which leads me to this — there has been a lot of talk lately in Malaysia about introducing flexible work arrangements or extending the maternity leave, among other measures. These are all great and necessary things to help working mothers.

But my issue is this. It still assumes and indirectly places the role of childcare with the mother. Are we saying that dads don't have similar responsibilities? And what about single fathers? I once read an article by a well-known local journalist who happens to be a single dad — he bemoaned the fact that most diaper changing rooms in malls are situated in the women's restroom. So, where was he supposed to change his child? An excellent point.

Recently, our prime minister, speaking at the release of a TalentCorp-PwC Diversity in the Workplace Survey (2013), said, "There is a need for greater efforts to improve diversity at top management, which has a representation of only 24% women." This was against a backdrop of a female labour workforce participation rate of 52.4% in 2013.

So, if we're serious about helping women succeed at the workplace, we have to help the men help the women. Here are a few ideas, but I wonder if local employers will put these radical steps into action.

1 Paternity leave shouldn't be a paltry two or three days (or not given at all — the practice in many companies, I hear). It's great that more organisations are starting to extend their maternity leave to three months or more. Of course, there are physical reasons why women need a certain amount of time off after giving birth. But by giving three months to women versus three days to men, aren't we saying that we only expect the women to be responsible for childcare? Why aren't we giving our men something more palatable, like two weeks' paternity leave at the very least?

If that doesn't sound appealing, think about

this: A recent Swedish study demonstrated that men who take time off from work to care for their children live longer than other men.

2 Taking the leave idea a step further, why not give new fathers special "family care" leave, say, two weeks to a month that they can utilise any time throughout the first year of their child's life? This could be when the child is first born, which may be a huge adjustment for both parents. Or it could be used throughout the year when the child falls ill or a babysitter isn't available. Thus, the burden doesn't just fall on mum.

3 Organisations also need to start talking about the role men can play ... and talk about it openly. Let's try and change societal attitudes that a man isn't really a man if he asks for any sort of flexibility/leeway from his employer to play his bit in raising his family. Support networks can go far here. For example, we have a Parents Network at PwC to share experiences and provide support to members. Sadly, its attendees are still 90% female, so we can do better in bringing in our men.

4 And finally, this isn't so radical but if you're going to have flexible work arrangements in place, they need to be gender neutral, please.

What say you? Isn't it time we recognised our men for being a great parent too?

P.S. I don't know how many men are going to agree with what I've said here, but I'd love to hear from you. Tweet me @stephcaunter. E



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