

# Measuring up maternity leave

Parenting pressures and workplace expectations have made it difficult for women to re-enter the workforce after having their baby. A key hurdle is that while maternity leave is usually two months, the newborn should be breastfed for at least six months. Companies with flexible work arrangements can help ease their burden

**S**UE Ellen Chong, a mother of three, works in the sales department of a property development firm. She delivered her third child four months ago. Under the law, her company gave her two months of paid maternity leave.

For the first 28 days, Chong was in "confinement", a period women spend recuperating from the stress of childbirth.

Unlike most mothers, who are usually assisted by a confinement lady or relatives, she had no external help during this time, save for her maid.

Barely before her body had sufficiently replenished its energy reserves, the second month began and Chong had to start preparing to return to work.

On and off, she would respond to work queries on WhatsApp and email. "Even when I was on maternity leave, I had access to company emails," she says.

"Technically speaking, there was no need to touch work. But because of technology ... I wouldn't say I couldn't 'let go' ... I didn't reply directly, I just advised my colleagues on how to do the work."

On top of adjusting to a breastfeeding routine, Chong was tied up with caring for her two other boys, who attend pre-school.

Towards the end of the month, things got more hectic when her maid's contract ended. Chong had to quickly look for a babysitter who could care for the baby when she returned to work.

## Modern pressures on working mothers

Today, society's modern pressures have raised the bar for working mothers re-entering the workforce after childbirth.

As gender equality increases in the workplace, the barriers to

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Many mothers think the official maternity leave of two months is insufficient time to adapt to a new routine of caring for the baby and the family



by Lim Su Lin

Today's women want to excel both at home and at work



equal opportunities have diminished. This has led to a greater number of female workers seizing opportunities to climb up the corporate ladder.

Many have become more career-oriented, even aspiring to become leaders in their organisations.

These are women who prize their career goals. Once they become mothers, however, a conflict arises between these ambitions and the new maternal instincts kicking in.

While it may have been easier in the past to shift priorities, the modern working woman will find it harder to let job satisfaction take a backseat once she has a child.

Instead, she will do her best to prepare during maternity leave, so that when the time comes to return to work, both she and the baby would have adapted to a routine that caters for her absence.

## Much to do, little time to do it

Under the 1955 Employment Act, women are given 60 consecutive days of maternity leave as a minimum entitlement, provided they have been employed for at least four months, and worked for at least 90 days, prior to starting leave.

While this might seem like ample time to the man-in-the-street, mothers who have been through the experience say it is insufficient time to "fit everything in".

"I think most mothers would agree that two months is just too short a time," says Chong. "It's not just about getting time to bond with the baby. Our bodies also need to recuperate to pre-pregnancy conditions."

Even before learning how to care for the baby, the new mother first has to rest and heal as birthing a child places great strain on the body. Most women take up to one month to recuperate.

"The challenge really comes in the second month, when the mother starts to develop a routine to care for the family as

well as the baby," says PK (who declines to give her full name), a working mother in her late 30s.

PK currently works for an MSC-Malaysia-status company. She delivered both her children while she was with her former company.

Both times, she took three months' leave as she felt two months was "really not enough" time to adapt to a new routine, like breastfeeding the baby.

"I wanted to do it (breastfeed). Nowadays, society is a bit more educated. We are constantly being bombarded with the benefits of natural feeding instead of feeding the child formula milk," PK explains.

"I believe it is natural. I never even thought of giving my baby formula milk. It's very expensive," Chong agrees.

At the start, mothers usually allow their babies to set the pace for breastfeeding as the child is still dependent on milk. This means adjusting to a new routine and getting up at odd hours of the night, which can be exhausting, even for experienced mothers.

"The mother's body will naturally adjust to specific times and produce milk automatically when the child needs to feed. It's like clockwork," says PK.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that breastfed infants should continue to feed exclusively on breast milk for at least six months to achieve optimal growth, development and health.

With the current maternity leave terms, mothers must ensure that their bodies can consistently produce milk for the baby once they return to work. This is not always possible, which creates additional pressure on them.

"I was stressed out by the preparations of going back to work, while trying to build up adequate supply to provide sustenance for my child," says PK.

## Six months ideal for breastfeeding mums

Relatively speaking, Malaysia has done well by guaranteeing its working mothers full pay during maternity leave. Some governments choose to scale payment down instead, to a portion of the usual salary, while in the United States, working mothers do not even get paid benefits.

However, the length of leave required remains debatable. Is two months truly

sufficient for mothers to adjust?

Speaking from experience, both Chong and PK do not think so.

"There wasn't enough time to think. It was just like, 'Oh ok, I have another month to go,'" Chong recalls of entering the second month of leave.

Five years ago, the government had recommended that maternity leave be extended to 90 days for the public sector, though no changes were made to the official 60-day term.

Both Chong and PK feel that a 60- to 90-day term is still insufficient time to organise household affairs and tick off all the boxes before returning to work.

"There were just so many things to attend to at home. If you had asked me, I would have said, 'I'll never be ready to go back,'" says Chong.

"It can be quite overwhelming, especially if you are a new mother," PK agrees.

"Nowadays, women want to excel in both the home and the workplace. We want to be the perfect mum, to give to the child and yet also contribute to our career."

PK believes that giving mothers six months of time off is ideal so that they can have an uninterrupted period to breastfeed.

"Six months is the minimum amount of time the WHO recommends to breastfeed your baby," she says.

"Three months is the bare minimum. If possible, it would be good to have six months. At least then, when you return to work, you will have peace of mind knowing that you have provided the full term of care."

Currently, many breastfeeding mothers who return to work will express milk at the workplace.

Because of the body's natural rhythm, they must pump at regular intervals, which can interrupt their work. Whether or not this is well received depends on the individual company's culture.

"I'm lucky that my boss is understanding," says Chong. "Last week, when I had training, I told my superior I needed time in the morning and afternoon to pump and she was okay with it."

Currently, Chong pumps milk at least twice daily in the office's lactation room, taking roughly 20 minutes each time. So far, she has not encountered problems excusing herself, even during meetings.

Other mothers, however, may not be as fortunate. Though PK's previous employers were initially supportive of her pumping at work, they grew less tolerant over time.

"When it became an extended thing, people started to view it less kindly," she says. Peer pressure was also another challenge.

"When people talk, mothers can get pressured. I felt that people were thinking, 'The baby is already so old. Why does she need to keep on breastfeeding?'" she says.

### Flexibility as an alternative

No one can deny that the concerns voiced by these mothers are valid, yet from a business perspective, organisations may hesitate to award longer leave to women.

Besides the financial cost of having to pay for extended maternity cover, management may feel that the productivity of the company will be affected when workers are absent for too long, says Pauline Ho, leader of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Malaysia's Assurance unit.

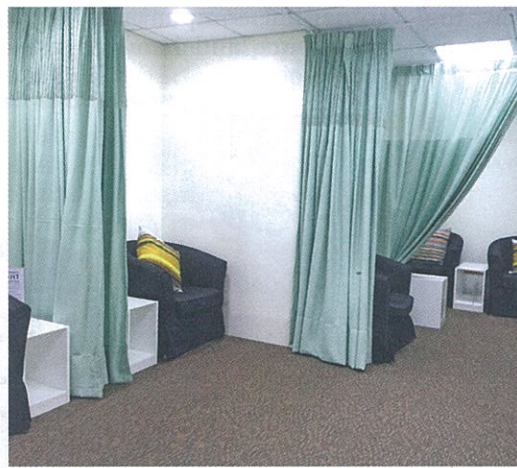
"Obviously, the more leave you give, the better, but then where do you draw the line?" she asks.

Ho, who has triplets, is the first woman to take up the role of Assurance leader in the firm.

After her delivery, she took 90 days of leave (PwC's official maternity leave entitlement was 60 days then but they have since increased it to 90). According to Ho, this was enough time for her to adjust to the new



Maybank's daycare centre provides drop-in emergency childcare services for workers with young children



One of the four lactation rooms in Menara Maybank that offer a private and comfortable environment for mothers to express their milk

routine.

If extending maternity leave beyond three months is not feasible, companies could explore other aspects of work to make things easier for working mothers – for example, having flexible working arrangements.

PwC gives such options to its employees. Examples of programmes include flexspace, where employees can work away from the office or FWA, where employees can work 2.5 to four days in a week if needed. Additional time off can also be taken via the career break programme where employees can take one to three months off.

"The understanding is that you must be contactable and you must be doing work. As long as there is this trust, performance and delivery matter more than being in the office," Ho explains.

### More time to bond with the child

While PwC's flexible work arrangements are available to both male and female employees, Ho says the majority of those who sign on are young mothers.

"Often, what you hear is that they want to spend more time bonding with their kids," she says.

Other flexible-work-friendly organisations also report a strong female imprint in the take-up.

"In terms of gender mix, 69% of the population now on flexible work arrangements are women," says Nora Abd Manaf, Maybank's group chief human capital officer.

This is an important point for companies. It signals that these women do appreciate support to help ease the transition process. In fact, research has shown that many tend to target companies with family-centred policies that allow for a balance between managing their career and caring for their children.

Furthermore, mothers say companies that support them with flexible work arrangements stand a better chance of retaining their talent.

"Women would appreciate employers who provide this support. Rather than thinking of leaving, they will try to think of ways to give back to the company," says PK.

There are other ways in which companies can be proactive in supporting returning mothers. For example, Maybank gives nursing mothers access to a private and comfortable environment to express their milk at the workplace.

There are four lactation rooms in Menara Maybank (the bank's headquarters) furnished with amenities like chairs and tables, water dispensers, a sink with cleaning supplies, and a small refrigerator to store the milk.

Last January, the bank introduced a daycare centre to provide drop-in emergency childcare service for its staff, across all grades. Over 4,300 cases of attendance were recorded as of the end of last month.

### Compassionate culture the way forward

As women become increasingly valuable assets in the workforce, it is important to discuss maternity leave, flexible work and other policies that support mothers wishing to re-enter the workforce after having a baby.

If mandating a longer period of maternity leave is not practical, businesses can still do their part by incorporating more flexibility for returning mothers to tailor their working hours to suit their needs. Organisations like PwC and Maybank have already set the ball rolling.

But spreading that culture across the board is important as well. Some mothers say they still hesitate to participate in their company's flexible work arrangements as they fear it might harm their chances of promotion.

"Having been with different companies, I would say the problem is although policies may be there ... You can have welfare policies that look great on your CSR report, but really it boils down to the people behind them," says PK.

"If you have HR [a human resources department] that is supportive, but an immediate superior who is not as understanding, it can still affect your appraisal and chance of promotion."

Ho says senior management must play its role in allaying those fears.

"It's important to have the right tone from the top. You need to demonstrate to people that those who propose these policies are actually backing them up and that it won't harm their career progress," she explains.

"There's no point rolling out such policies, then frowning upon them."

At the end of the day, treating mothers well is something that all companies should aim for, on paper as well as in practice.

This will work only if there are people who understand and value their employees as human beings and not just a workforce. **FocusM**



Ho says as long as there is trust, the work-from-home arrangement will work well