

Time for national policy on paternity leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As a young husband, Taurean Roach dreams of starting a family with his wife Kimberlee Thompson-Roach soon. But he is worried that he may not be able to spend enough time with his new baby after birth, because some workplaces allow fathers very little time off for paternity leave.

He shared the concern with representatives of the Bureau of Gender Affairs and the Men's Committee last night, during a panel discussion on the topic 'Is Paternity Leave Essential?'

"I think that it is unfair that the lady has to go through childbirth and the man is only allowed to have one week or two weeks' leave in order to support his partner or spouse," he said.

Roach's sentiments were echoed by several members of the audience who believe it is necessary for fathers to be given adequate time to bond with their newborns.

The discussion came one month after telecommunications company FLOW announced a new parental policy under which fathers are granted eight weeks paid paternity leave, while mothers get double the time off.

Director of the Bureau of Gender Affairs, Patricia Boyce, said the Government views paternity leave as a vehicle for social change and equality, as well as a means of building stronger families and communities.

"The arrival of a baby is usually a joyous occasion, but as many of you may know or may have experienced, a newborn baby is a challenge. For most, taking care of a newborn baby is a 24/7 job that usually entails sleep deprivation.

"And it is usually the women [who are] tasked with this with this care, because of the ideology that supports the notion that since women are able to bear children they are more suited to care for the child," she said.

According to Boyce, paternity leave helps to strengthen the parents' partnership and also increases the wellbeing of the mother and child.

"Research has shown that father and baby bonding actually improves a father's ability to care for his children in the long term, and means he is more engaged and involved as a parent.

"Some women and men, particularly some first-time fathers, are often afraid to take up and hold a newborn baby in the very early stages. But research has shown that being a father who is around in the early stages gives lasting confidence in caregiving," she said.

Retired Chief Community Development Officer, Patricia Hackett-Codrington also supported the move, saying it is necessary, given that more men are taking on a more active role in raising their children.

"Over the years, fathers have moved to become more involved in the lives of their children. And we're trying to break down the division of labour in such a way that we understand that roles in the home must be shared, because in this era both men and women work, they both go out, and therefore if the family is to be successful then both people must share in what is happening in the family," she said.

Retired Director of the National Assistance Board, Reverend Clayton Springer, favours the term 'parental leave' over paternity or maternity leave, as he is of the view that both parents should share the responsibility of raising their child.

"Therefore, the whole question of parental leave would help us to see the involvement of both a mother and father. And the benefits that have been readily identified have indicated that it is a win-win situation for mother, for father and for children as well.

"And since in this era, especially, we are so concerned about where society is going, the falling level of morals and lack of ethical behaviour on all corners, it is incumbent that we do everything we can to establish some support systems for the family as a family, and I believe that parental leave... is one such strategy that can have a lot of benefits for the restoration of what we call traditional values that seem to have become outdated," said Reverend Springer.

For Executive Director of the Barbados Family Planning Association, Anderson Langdon, a discussion on paternity leave was long overdue.

“Involved fatherhood helps children thrive. Involved fatherhood helps boys and girls to achieve their full potential now and in future generations. Involved fatherhood makes men happier and confident. Men involved in caregiving bring a level of equity back to our society. Fathers want to spend time with their children more than they have, but the opportunity hasn’t been presented. Men’s participation and support are urgently needed to ensure that all children are wanted children,” he said.

Langdon suggested that men be given six weeks of paternity leave to help them bond with their newborns; however he noted that there are several issues that need to be worked out before an official period can be set.

One person who would have liked to spend more time with his new babies is father of two, Fabian Sargeant.

The Programme Officer at the Barbados Youth Service said he took advantage of all the time he was allowed following the births of his children.

“I think paternity leave for men should be the same time as women....I would love three months to be home with my children,” he said. “I have lived that bonding experience and I said...I need to create a difference in terms of what I was seeing in communities among men.”

Dr Alison Bernard was present with her husband, Lawson, who she described as her “constant support”.

She too, supports calls for paternity leave, saying it would benefit both parent and child, particularly in the area of breastfeeding.

“There’s so much evidence that shows that if Dads support mothers in breastfeeding they will breastfeed for much longer. We have a terrible breastfeeding rate in this country – 19.7 per cent as of seven years ago. And the World Health Organization says get it up to 50 per cent by 2025 [so] we have a lot of work to do,” the medical doctor told the audience.

The audience, which was made up mainly of men, were in full support of paternity leave.

Moderator Sanka Price lamented the lack of representation from the trade unions at last night’s discussion. But for Taurean Roach, the event was a welcome start to a conversation that he hopes will lead to a national policy on paternity leave in the future.

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