

# The role of length of parental leave in strengthening mother-child bond and the husband-wife relationship in the Maldives

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**ABSTRACT** *This study examines how the extension of the period of parental leave, from 60 days to 180 days that occurred in the Maldives in 2019, affected the family dynamics of mothers and their children. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from seven full-time working mothers, who had experienced both shorter and longer parental leave. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The most prominent finding was the higher level of involvement of father in taking care of the child with mothers reporting substantial strengthening in mother-child bond and the husband-wife relationship as parents during the longer parental leave. This research adds a new dimension to the discussion of the impact of longer parental leave legislation on family consolidation outcomes. It also has implications for the development of family policies that support the needs of both mothers and fathers during the first months of an infant's life.*

*Keywords: mother-child bond, paternity-maternity leave, mother-child well-being, parental leave policy, husband-wife relationship*

Parental leave policy can be considered as the key policy for parents to continue their job after childbirth (Valentova, 2008). This is true especially for mothers who are often forced to stop working or take an indefinite break due to the additional and new responsibilities that comes with having a newborn child. It is a full-time job being a parent (Lanier, 2016). Those who ultimately decide to return to work, are forced to find alternative options such as getting help from relatives or non-relatives, for example; keeping the child under the care of grandparents or seeking a day care service. It is also important to highlight that the care and contribution of the father for both the mother and child is equally important at this stage (Baghersad et al., 2019). The fathers' support and contribution in the care of mother and infant during postpartum and motherhood stresses are crucial for mothers' wellbeing. Fathers' care during the days that follow childbirth, significantly helps to enhance the health of the mother and the family's overall well-being (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018).

Up until 2019, in the Maldives, working mothers were accorded 60 days of paid maternity leave, while working fathers got only three days of paternity leave (President Office, 2019). It has already been established that when the father returns to work, subsequently a few days after the birth of the child, it takes a heavy toll on the mother (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). Recent research confirms that at a global level, women spend an unbalanced amount of time doing

labour as compared to men, and this observation is the most evident in the area of childcare (Ferrant et al., 2014). Looking after an infant is regarded as women's "natural" work (Antonopoulos, 2009). This perception reduces the role of the father's participation in childcare. The mothers find themselves juggling multiple roles from looking after a helpless infant to household chores, which can result in distress and even cause relationship issues between the husband and wife (Petts, 2018). Even though research on unpaid care work indicates that it has an important contribution to the well-being of households and families to a great extent (Stiglitz et al., 2007), it may well be suggested that it also has a profound negative effect on the overall unpaid work experiences of mothers.

### **Research Aims**

At the infancy of a new democracy that has recently attained the status of a middle-income nation, Maldives stands relatively high in development indicators than other countries in the region. However, it falls significantly short of achieving Millenium Development Goals (MDG) goal 3 of promoting gender equality and empowering women (MDG, 2010). It is a responsibility that falls on each member of the society to ensure women empowerment and facilitating women to reach their true potential (Akpotor, 2009; Lohani & Aburaida, 2017). The working population of the Maldives is 181,144 out of which 73,717 (40.7%) of them are women (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Women often find that career opportunities are limited after having a child, and it may affect promotions as well as opportunities for advancement in workplace (Light, 2013). The subject of the gender roles in parenting is also a highly debated topic. In the Maldives, it is observed that couples where both partners hold jobs, it is still women who tend to shoulder more work related to the house and child-rearing.

The Maldives is not new to maternity and paternity leave policy. In accordance with the employment act of the Maldives, the parental policy of Maldives, prior to March 2019, entitled female employees to a maternity leave of 60 days, and paternity leave of three days upon the delivery of a child (Employment Act, 2008). Changes have been brought to the maternity as well as the paternity leave policy of the Maldives by the governance of the current President, His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih on the 7th of March 2019 as one of his pledges for the first 100 days of his administration. The changes that were proposed are to be passed as a law and the policy was immediately put to effect by some companies in the government sector of the country, such as the State Trading Organization (STO), Maldives Airports Company Limited and Maldives Civil Aviation Authority (President's Office, 2019).

Extended paid parental leave policies are a strong tool that can support families before and after the birth of a child (Huebener, 2016). Longer parental leave will prepare the mother mentally, allowing her to spend longer hours with the infant and even allows for exclusive breast-feeding time (Dagher et al., 2014). Breastfeeding brings mothers a range of advantages in terms of their own well-being and self-esteem, as well as strengthening bonding with their child (Gupta et al., 2016). A study conducted by Staehelin et al. (2007), in Switzerland, concluded that mothers who leave their child in day care are more likely to develop postpartum stress symptoms compared to children cared for at home. While much research attention has been paid to the effects of longer parental leave policies on maternal

labor supply (Baum, 2003; Kunze, 2016; Schönberg, 2014), little is known about their effects on parent-child bonding and even relationship strengthening between the husband and wife as parents. This deliberation has led us to examine the longer parental leave policy of the Maldives and its effects on family dynamics. Avendano et al (2015) in their study, indicated that maternity leave has long-term positive impact on families' overall well-being. Ransford (2008) has ascertained that men taking longer paternity leave coincided with mothers' agreement of greater relationship satisfaction and lesser relationship conflicts.

### **Parental leave policies**

Drew (2005) defines paid parental leave as “employment-protected leave of absence granted to employed parents during a period after the termination of maternity leave to look after their newborn child for a certain time, whilst giving them some degree of security in respect of employment, social security and remuneration”. The term maternity leave is used to indicate the time that is taken off work by a woman right before the birth of a new child. The time is spent by the mother to recover physically from child birth and also to take care of the new infant. This type of leave is typically available only to mothers (World Bank, 2015). This extended time is provided to parents in many nations as a means to provide care for the new born infants (Moss & Deven, 2006). It is evident that at least 178 countries have laws that grants paid leave for mothers, as well as more than 50 countries also guarantee paid paternity leave for fathers (Popper, 2019). For instance, countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom offers 14 or more weeks of paid leave for new mothers. It is also evident that member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), that are also considered among the world's most developed nations, offer on average 18 weeks of paid maternity leave, with an average of 13 weeks at full pay (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). It is reported that women taking leaves of 12, 15, and 20 weeks or more after childbirth, testified greater vitality, better mental health and smaller number of limitations to their daily responsibilities (Galtry & Callister, 2005).

Maternity and paternity leave policy have been of much debate (Galim, 2011). Chatterji and Markowitz (2005) argues strongly that parent's health improves considerably with longer parental leave and additionally, reduces stress and improves the quality time the infant gets to spend with parents. Similarly, Pedersen and Schmidt (2014), are in agreement that during the first year of child's life, mother's absence could disrupt mother-child attachment and deprive the child of the motivation that promotes cognitive development. Chatterji & Markowitz (2005) ascertained that longer maternity leave benefits children and positively affect the health and well-being of mothers. They also detailed that not long ago, maternity leave policies were designed only to protect maternal and newborn child's health. However, recent research has shed light on the importance of maternal and paternal leave durations to be taken into consideration on policy level discussions and deliberations (Lero, 2003). One of the family friendly leave policy recommendation of UNICEF is for governments and private businesses to ensure a minimum of six months paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, after the birth of the child. These six months must include at least 18 weeks of paid maternity leave. However, variation in the duration of maternity leave is significant

(Jayasekaran & Miguet, 2020). Saeed (2018), raised concerns regarding Maldivian women resigning from their jobs after being pregnant or soon after child birth because of the shorter maternity leave. He also further indicated that the shorter duration of the maternity leave may lead to increased postpartum depression and stress in the mothers as they cannot exclusively breastfeed their children during their time at work.

### **Mother-child bond and attachment**

Hill & Flanagan (2019), defined mother-child bond as the formation of a close relationship between a mother and child especially through frequent or constant association. The instant bond between parent-child at birth has been a highly debatable topic since research persistently found that both parent-child interactions and attachments need time to develop and are established after repeated interactions (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). Based on research in Uganda and later in Baltimore, it is evident that separate patterns of attachment develop between infants and their mothers in the early years of life (Galtry & Callister, 2005). The notion of parent-child instant bond at birth has been a subject of considerable debate (Jansen et al., 2008). Research has consistently found that both parent-child interactions and attachments take time to develop and are established after repeated interactions. In order to develop these attachments, it is necessary that a significant amount of time is spent in repeated interactions. It takes time for new parents to learn to read their infants' cues from feeding to changing, and also it takes time for the infant to learn to trust the mother and the father (Zigler & Hall, 2000). Based on a research in Uganda and later in Baltimore it was evidenced that separate patterns of attachment developed between infants and their mothers in the early years of life. The nature of the maternal-infant relationship is directly related to the level of responsiveness established by the mother to her newborn. According to Galtry and Callister (2005), mothers who responded more quickly to their infants' cries at three months were more likely to have developed secure maternal-child attachments by one year.

### **Husband-wife relationship as parents**

Work-family balance has become more challenging for working parents in recent decades, including reduced paternal involvement, lower parental well-being, and lower parental relationship quality. Petss and Knoestor (2018) concluded that paternity leave helps to reduce gender disparities and strengthen family relationships. Longer paternal leave increases fathers' engagement in childcare at the early stage of child's life, and in turn, has a positive impact on the father child bond as well (Reich et al., 2012). Countries where the paternity leave is more common, find that fathers are more likely to continue being involved in parenting as well as divide household responsibilities with their partner if they take time off (Tamm, 2018). In Sweden, the ideological shift towards more equal opportunities for gender role advocating women's rights to employment implied new role for the father. Hence, they increased the paternity leave. Longer paternity leave not only increased the interaction between the father and his child but also co-operation between husband and wife (Chronholm, 2007).

Several researchers from Europe, where paternity leave is more common, find that fathers in the long-term leave are more likely to continue to be involved in

parenting (Tamm, 2018) as well as to rightfully divide household responsibilities with their partner if they take time off after their child arrives. Cowan and Cowan (2019) indicated that leave-taking of father, and particularly a leave of 2 weeks or more, is positively associated with children's perceptions of fathers' involvement, father-child closeness, and father-child communication which altogether improves family relationships.

### **Methods, procedures and participants**

In the Maldives, the new longer parental leave policy came into effect as recent as in March 2019, therefore, the rightfully target sample for the research is limited. This research is underpinned by phenomenology and an inductive approach was used in analyzing data to obtain rich descriptive participant experiences. Semi-structured interview was the main method of data collection. The length of each interview lasted not more than 50 minutes. The interviews for this research were conducted through the app Zoom as the country was in full lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Auzam, 2020) at the time of data collection. The Zoom experience of conducting interviews gave us the opportunity to do face-to-face interviews through an online platform for the safety of both the researcher and the participant amidst a pandemic adhering to the guidelines of Health Protection Agency (HPA) of the Maldives (Health Protection Agency, 2020).

Participants for this research were selected by making announcements for the target groups in social media platforms with the permission of the admin of the group to identify and recruit potential participants. The announcement included the recruitment criteria for the research. Convenient sampling technique was used for sample selection. Sample sizes, which was not fixed prior to data collection, depended on participants availability, as well as the study's objectives. A total of 7 participants were interviewed. Among the 7 participants, 3 were from the outer islands and 4 were from the capital city of Male'.

A sample of seven working mothers who were married to working fathers were selected as the final sample of the study. The participants fulfilled the criteria that they must have at least two children: one child before the implementation of the longer parental leave policy and at least one child after the implementation of the policy. Moreover, the participants were also full-time employees of organizations which follows the current longer parental leave policy. Additionally, the spouses of the participants were also full-time employees of organizations which follows the current longer parental leave policy.

### **Analysis and main findings**

Codes and themes were derived from the large amount of interview data that was collected. The approach used to analyze data was thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is a method of finding, analyzing and breaking down large complex data into shorter themes within data to better understand. We found that the mother got empowered in many folds with the longer maternal leave. The mothers were able to spend more time with their infants, allowing them to properly breastfeed the child without having to go for other alternative options such as bottle feeding. Also, this analysis shed light on the fact that mothers cared deeply about the early well-being of the child especially immunizations. Moreover, the data revealed that due to the extended one-month paternity leave, the fathers

were also able to contribute more of their time and commitment to the wife and child as well. Similarly, this analysis also revealed there was a felt emotional and mental stability in both the mother and father with the longer parental leave. The mothers also indicated strongly that the husband-wife bond had grown stronger during the longer leave while taking care of the infant together.

The days that follow soon after the birth of a child is critical and necessary for the mother-child bond. In our research, all the participants agreed that the bond between the mother and the child was greatly strengthened due to the longer parental leave. According to Plotka and Busch-Rossnagel (2018), the parent-child bond needs time and repeated interactions to develop and these repeated interactions requires an adequate amount of time with one another during the first year of life.

*“The leave was so short we had to go back to work, so there was a little drift in the bond. I had to get back to work right after maternity leave that is two months after the birth of my child, so my mother took care of my baby most of the time. I had to drop him at a different house where my mom lives. So, the first born spent more time there at that house. So, compared to the second child, yes, I think there is a drift in the bond between the first born and me. The time spent with first born was much less.”*

From the data analysis, it is also evident that not spending enough time with child in the first days following the birth, hinders the strength of the mother-child bond. A research conducted by Galtry and Callister (2005), concluded that the parent-child bond does not always occur immediately at birth but is more likely to be part of a gradually evolving and enduring process of familiarization and reciprocal interactions. However, when the child is given to a second caregiver it limits this interaction.

*“After 2 months, the time spent with my child hindered a lot when I started working again. For instance, I had to work after hours in the school where I work. It was very hard. I had to spend a lot of time in school and when I come back home, I was always tired. After feeding the baby I get the baby ready to go out for a walk but due to tiredness, I am unable to go most days. So, the baby is taken out by either the baby’s grandmother or grandfather. Even on the weekends, I had to work so was unable to give enough time to my baby. Coming home after doing all the school work, I miss out all the fun times with my baby and most importantly the relation building time with my baby.”*

Participants reported that with the longer parental leave, they were able to spend more time with their newborn. With the longer parental leave, more positive interactions between the mother and child were also reported possible. This in turn, greatly strengthened the mother-child bond. Moreover, due to the repeated interactions, it was reported that the infant seemed to have a stronger attachment to the mother, which according to the participants, was possible only due to the longer leave. This finding is backed by Galtry and Callister (2005) who found that mother-infant relationship relates to the level of responsiveness established by the mother to her newborn. With the longer parental leave, the participants who were able to successfully build a healthy attachment with infants did not want go back to work because they felt anxious about letting someone else to take care of their new born.



*“With the extension, I am finally able to spend enough time with my child. But still, I feel like I want to spend even more time with the baby. To be honest, with the extension of the parental leave, I don’t feel like going back to work now because of the extension, I am able to enjoy fully the motherhood without the worry of having to deal with work or pay. We enjoyed our time on the leave. So, the bond with the second born was so much stronger.”*

Before the policy amendment, the participants really struggled with breastfeeding and had to consider alternatives rather than exclusively feeding their infant for six months as recommended by health authorities. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends exclusive breastfeeding (i.e., no other fluids or solids) for six months and then continued breastfeeding combined with solid foods for 2 years or as long as mother and baby desire. Some of the participants reported having to take breaks within office hours in order to go feed the baby and the baby would have cried a lot before the mother arrived home. The participants reported that it affected their concentration and made them mentally unfit to do office work due to their constant worry of their child being hungry. However, with extension of the leave, the participants felt very satisfied and accomplished as they were able to exclusively breastfeed their baby without having to worry if their baby would go hungry for the first six months of the child’s life. According to UNICEF (2003), World Health Organization urges exclusive breastfeeding because it is strongly associated with improved child health and the relationship with the mother. A study conducted by Jansen et al. (2008), concluded that theoretical mechanisms of breastfeeding may enhance the maternal bond or infant attachment (i.e., endocrine and sensory factors involved in breastfeeding). In line with literature and also the findings of this research, it can be concluded that it was only with longer parental leave that the mothers were able to exclusively breastfeed their child, creating stronger sense of mother-child well-being and establishing a strong mother-child bond.

*“I breastfed the first born for two years but also along with that I had to give the baby formulae because I had to attend the office. I also had college at that time so since the milk wasn’t enough, I had to give him formulae. Mostly I breastfed the first born for two years. And the second baby it’s been one year and four months I have breastfed him and I also give him normal food now.”*

*“Back than I took 30-minute break from work to go home and feed the baby. The baby did take alternative milks. But with the second child, I was able to breastfeed exclusively for six months.”*

As per the findings, almost all the participants agree that vaccination and regular checkups with the doctor is good for the well-being of the child. Some of the participants reported that, since they had to go back to work much sooner with the earlier policy, they usually take a day or two of sick leave or family responsibility leave, in order to vaccinate their child or take them for regular doctors’ checkup. With the extension of the leave, the participants are more satisfied that they got enough time with baby during the vaccination days. This is important mainly because, during the six months of maternity, all the vaccinations that causes mild fever were given to the baby when they were on leave. According to Han et al. (2009), mothers reported difficulties going for regular immunizations or to take

the infant for doctor's visits, when mothers return to work in the first three months of infant's life. This eventually affects the life of the mother and her child as it is the first few months of an infant's life, that the infant needs a caregiver the most. From this finding also it is evident that longer parental leave has positive impact on both child and mother's well-being.

*"After vaccination, the kid sometimes get fever so I have to take one to two days leave. Every time I have to vaccinate the kids, I had to take at least two days of leave, but with the 6 months maternity leave, all vaccine that likely gives a fever was given with me while on maternity leave. But with my first born, all the vaccines were given within the six months while I was working. So, I was forced to take twodays of sick leave. Also, for the check-ups, if one overlaps the office hours, I had to take a family responsibility leave."*

*"My children are my first priority. They come before my daily tasks and also my job at school. So, if I have to take my children for a checkup, I take leave of absence those days. Even with all the responsibilities in the house, I have never missed a single checkup of my children, nor am I going to in the future."*

Even though it was evidenced that, under shorter parental leave, the relation between the participants and their husbands were stable, the participants stressed on the fact that their husbands did not get enough time to help them with the baby and also do household chores. Moreover, along with the lesser time for interactions with the baby, most of the husbands did not get time to fully learn how to help the mother with the baby's needs such as bathing, putting the child to sleep, and changing the diapers.

*"Before the extension of the leave, in the three days we got, we used to do everything together. But since he got only 3 days, he was unable to stay to help out much after that. Actually, the father's involvement is very important in taking care of the baby. I needed a lot of help from him. But having to take care of the baby, which was very new to us, we both struggled a lot. Most days I am alone with the child as he is away at work."*

With the policy amendment, the fathers were able to spend more quality time with the infant and accompany mothers with all the baby related chores as well as the household chores. Participants reported that this impacted positively the husband and the wife relationship and family-child well-being. This reporting is also backed by Ransford (2008), who ascertained those men who took longer paternal leave agrees with the claims of the mother, of greater relationship satisfaction and lesser relationship conflicts. Furthermore, according to Petts and Knoestor (2018), the longer paternal leave has helped to lessen the gender disparities and strengthen family relationships. Therefore, according to the findings of this research and in line with the literature, it can be concluded that with the longer paternal leave, there was more opportunity for the couple to establish a healthy husband and wife relationship.

Before the extension of leave, the participants reported that having to go back to work after 2 months, when the child was still very small, was hard. They found it difficult to focus on the office work as they were continuously anxious and stressed about the baby. Since the paternal leave was only three days as per the older policy, the father was also not able to help out therefore, the participants reported that on several occasions, they had to get the help of the infant's grandparents or an



aunt. Petts and Knoester (2018) emphasized extensively about the importance of work–family balance and how it has become more challenging for parents in recent decades. This conflict has become even more difficult for families, with reduced paternal involvement resulting in lower parental well-being, and lower parental relationship quality. With the shorter leave policy, the participants said that, having to go to work after a sleepless night of taking care of the baby and putting the baby to sleep, was extremely taxing for them. Participants reported loss of concentration and difficulties in doing office work with a clear head. However, with the extension of the leave, the participants reported that the fathers were more involved with taking care of the child so it reduced a lot of stress and helped them get mentally ready for everyday work and family life. Fathers on longer leave are more likely to be involved not only in parenting and taking care of the new born, but also with normal household errands (Tamm, 2018). This would ease their partner and help them both physically and mentally and in turn creating a more positive and healthy relationship (Petts et al., 2020).

In summary, the literature and the findings of the research are in favour that the extension of the paternal leave, assisted not only in creating a strong and healthy relationship between the husband and the wife, but also helped to create a strong bond as a family which in turn showed a positive correlation in the child’s well-being. The findings of the research reflect that with the longer paternal leave, husbands are able to contribute more and be involved in taking care of the child. The participants have reported that, the commitment of the husbands to their wives and children has significantly increased with the extension of the leave.

*“Our relationship has gotten stronger. I got to find out how caring my husband was. He did help me throughout the one-month break that he got with the birth of our second child. He was very helpful during the birth of the first child too but he had to return to work after three days. So, he couldn’t help out much. But during the second birth, in his extended leave, he helped out a lot since he was home.”*

All participants agreed that with extension of the leave, the husbands became more involved in taking care of the baby, for instance, helping the baby bath, help the mother with breast feeding and also taking turns at night to put the baby to sleep. In this way, both the husband and wife did not tire out endlessly and got breaks while taking care of the child. Longer paternal leave has a positive effect as the increased engagement of the father in childcare at the early stage of the child’s life, positively affect the child’s well-being as well (Boll et al., 2012). It was reported that the fathers took responsibility of taking care of the other children too by taking them to school, helping them do homework and spending time with them so that the mother can focus on taking care of the newborn. Cowan and Cowan (2019) reported that the extension of the paternal leave is positively associated with the child’s perception of the father’s involvement and strengthens the bond between the father and older children. Repeated interactions increased the communications between the father and the child therefore, improving family relationships. Our research provided evidences that with the longer paternal leave, the husband was able to show more commitment to both the wife and the children which in turn has a positive effect on the child’s as well as the mother’s well-being.

The result of the research has both policy and practical implications. Through the findings from this research, we strongly agree that, if the new parental leave

policy were to be fully implemented as a law, it will not only benefit public sector employees but also the private sector. The private sector employees would also be able to get the same benefits as the public sector employees. Moreover, the results infer that most parents are more satisfied with longer parental leave as they were able to spend and build a stronger relationship with their infants. In addition, with the six months of the maternal leave, the mothers are able to exclusively breastfeed their children and give all the proper immunizations to the baby. Therefore, the parents, especially the mothers, are more mentally stress free and more ready to go back to work, since they are assured that the infant would be taken care of. With the extended paternal leave, the husbands are also more involved with the new adjustments that comes with the childbirth. The comparisons that were drawn between those who were on shorter and longer parental leave, helped to better understand the hardship faced by parents, especially working mothers during the shorter parental leave.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Employment Act (2008) of the Maldives needs to be amended to include the current longer leave policy, so that all the all the working people can get equal access to the parental leave. Moreover, we also urge that that there should be more flexibility in workplace in scheduling breastfeeding breaks for working mothers to increase the possibilities of consistent and high-quality infant care. Furthermore, we are in agreement to increase the paternal leave to 180 days period too, just as the mother, to remove the gap between the maternal and paternal leave, since a mother alone does not become a parent with the birth of a child but so does the father.

As the parental leave policies continues to evolve in the Maldives, there is an increasing need to further examine the impact on the well-being of women and children with shorter and longer parental leave. We agree that the length of the parental leave alone cannot determine the maternal mental health and the development of the child well-being because crucial factors such as workplace stress, resources, support and financial stability plays a significant role too. Since, the criterion of the research was not targeted for a specific work sector, further research could be done on the different work sectors (public and private) and then this can be compared to find out how the longer parental leave has affected them. This research mainly focuses on the mother and child's well-being. Therefore, the father's perception is an area that could be further researched. It has not been long since the policy was enacted therefore, the sample for this research was small and challenging to find. However, further research could be done on the basis of the objectives of this research 3 to 5 years later when the sample size can be larger.

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