

## 2018 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT YEAR: ENABLING WOMEN TO GIVE THEIR BEST

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Michelle-Ann Iking with her husband Kishore Suppiah and their daughter, Lara Anoushka Suppiah.

Balancing a career and family life is a daunting task for many of us. For women, and specifically, mothers, work and family responsibilities can get very stressful and tiring – physically, mentally and emotionally.

While it is normal to worry about things happening at home, for some mothers, the constant worrying over a child's welfare and safety while they're not with them can sometimes interrupt their work.

To reduce the pressure and encourage productivity, the Government is introducing several new initiatives through Budget 2018 that stand to benefit women in the public and private sectors.

One of these initiatives is to increase maternity leave from 60 to 90 days in the private sector, and total maternity leave from 300 to 360 days, with a maximum of 90 days per year in the public sector.

"I welcome the 90 days of maternity leave proposal for the private sector. I was lucky that my workplace was one of the first in Malaysia to initiate this benefit several years ago, well before I leveraged on it as a first time mother in 2016," says Michelle-Ann Iking, who works at a financial institution.

Iking, 41, who has a daughter, adds that becoming a parent is a life-changing event and it took time to adjust to the many changes.

"I was glad I had additional breathing space to come to terms with being a new mum, and the adjustments needed for me as a working professional," shares Iking.

Aishah Badrul, 29, who is currently five months pregnant with her second child, is also happy that she would have more time to focus on her family next year after she gives birth in April. "With my first child, I was tired all the time because I didn't get much help from anyone else apart from my husband. I felt like the 60 days of maternity leave went by too fast!

"It took some time for me to get back into the groove at work after the 60 days as I was still constantly fussing over every little thing about my son. I believe that with the extra 30 days, I would be able to re-adjust to things better," says Aishah, who works at a law firm.

Women's groups such as the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) welcomes the increase of

maternity leave days, adding that paternity leave would hopefully be introduced too to ensure that couples share childcare responsibilities.

Iking echoes this sentiment, stating that changing societal mindsets on the role of men in the household is important.

“I believe for women to be truly empowered to deliver on the professional front, men should also be empowered to be true partners on the domestic front. Even in a

progressive household where a man may share 50% of the domestic duties, a woman will often times be running 100%

of the domestic ‘project management’, carrying a mental load of other responsibilities like groceries, doctor appointments and school requirements, all of which traditionally fall on women.

“Women generally carry the burden of household management and care of others, both young and old, even in dual income families and this unbalanced division of non-professional labour means women have to work a lot harder to meet expectations, both professionally and personally. I’m luckier on the partner front than most women I know and I’m still exhausted a lot of the time,” she reveals.

### **Childcare centres and support**

Based on Budget 2018, all new office buildings would be required to prepare a childcare centre for employees.

This is important as one of the main reasons why some women do not return to the workforce after giving birth is the unavailability of reliable childcare centres that are close to where they work. Plus, not every family can afford nanny services.

“A critical issue I faced in returning to work was childcare. I am lucky I found a trustworthy daycare near my workplace, as babysitting by my aged parents and in-laws is not a full time solution for my family,” says Iking.

Aishah resorted to asking her neighbour to help out with her son. She hopes to find a reliable centre for both her son and her future child next year.

“Of course I trust my neighbour but I feel it might be an inconvenience for her and her family, even though she says it isn’t. I hope there is a place I can send my children to next year – either near my office or my husband’s,” she says.

When it comes to existing buildings, perhaps it is time that some measures be taken to address the issue.



WAO believes that having more women in leadership roles can improve a company’s performance.

“There are various models of employer-supported childcare that existing offices can look into. This includes setting up on-site or near-site childcare centres, arranging discounts with local childcare providers and providing subsidies for childcare,” says WAO communications officer Tan Heang Lee.

As 2018 has been dubbed Women Empowerment Year, the Government is encouraging more women to join – or re-join – the workforce.

To ensure this happens, a 12-month tax exemption will be given to women who re-enter the workforce after a (minimum) two-year break.

Aishah thinks this is a great move as she feels some women are forced to quit their jobs for reasons other than focusing on family life.

“I have a friend who quit because she did not like the way certain issues were being managed at her office. It was very difficult for her to get another job at the time so she started doing part-time work and that went on for a few years.

“I know she’s ready for full-time work now so this tax break would be good for her. I think there are many women who also go through the same thing.”

### **More women leaders**

The Government is keen to not only encourage women to continue working, but to go far in their careers.

It has allocated RM20mil to P.E.A.K (Performance.Empowerment.Acceleration.Knowledge), a six-month, fully-sponsored leadership programme run by MyWIN that aims to develop women leaders.



MyWIN is an institution established by the Prime Minister’s Department that hopes to empower women in leadership and entrepreneurship via education and training.

Women entrepreneurs aged between 20 and 35 years old stand to benefit from the P.E.A.K programme as it teaches key factors that would not only help one become an effective leader, but to also understand the need for an innovative business mindset in today’s economy.

Also tabled in the Budget is the requirement of a minimum 30% participation in the boards of Government-Linked Companies (GLCs), Government-Link Investment Companies (GLICs) and statutory bodies in Malaysia by the end of 2018.

WAO believes that having more women in leadership roles can improve a company's performance, citing a *Harvard Business Review* article that states increasing women's participation in corporate leadership from zero to 30% is linked to a 15% increase in the profitability for a typical firm.

"The notion that there aren't enough qualified women is often cited as a reason why it's hard to achieve equal representation of women in leadership. But this is simply a myth.

"There are qualified women, but their accomplishment and capabilities are often overlooked, due to discrimination and gender bias," says Tan.

She goes on to explain that gender discrimination at work is also an important issue that needs to be addressed.

Based on a survey run by WAO in 2016, the group discovered that 40% of pregnant women experience discrimination at work.

"They get fired, passed over for promotions or don't get hired after disclosing their pregnancy.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any laws that specifically protect women from discrimination in the private sector.

"So many women who experience gender discrimination often cannot get redress," Tan reveals.

In November 2016, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim announced in Parliament that the ministry is working on creating a Gender Equality Act in Malaysia.

Tan says that WAO and other women's groups in the country are currently working with the ministry to draft the proposal.

"We hope that the Gender Equality Act will become a reality very soon."