Treat paternity leave as employment benefit, MEF told

By Avila Geraldine (/authors/avila-geraldine) - June 23, 2019 @ 3:39pm

KOTA KINABALU: A Sabah non-governmental organisation (NGO) is unhappy over the Malaysian Employers Federation’s (MEF) opposition to plans to introduce a three-day paternity leave for the private sector.

MEF had said that it was unnecessary and would add to the operating cost of employers.

The Society for Equality, Respect and Trust for All Sabah (Serata) said it was disheartened that MEF would prioritise profit over the welfare of the children and families of employees.

"While Serata understands the importance of profit for businesses, especially in these economically-challenging times, such a belief that paternity leave is not necessary is indicative of how deeply-rooted stereotypes are in Malaysia," said Serata founder and chairperson Sabrina Melisa Ariffin.

"This needs to change. In the world as they understand it, women work in lower paying jobs or as housewives, while men are primary breadwinners.

"That is not how it works anymore. In reality, more families are relying on two incomes, and at times it is possible that the wife actually holds a higher post than the husband, or earns more."

She was responding to comments made by MEF executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan on the government’s plan to amend the Employment Act 1955 to require employers to provide paternity leave.

He said MEF did not agree with the proposal as employers would have to spend more than RM150 million.

Sabrina said it was strange that Malaysian employers were still bickering over three days of paternity leave when neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Myanmar were already giving employees at least two weeks leave.

"The first few weeks after birth, a mother needs to take good care of herself to rebuild her strength and will need plenty of rest, good nutrition, and help during the first few weeks," said Sabrina.

"Saying paternity leave is not necessary seems to be based on a few assumptions; firstly, that there is someone else to care for the new mother such as mothers and mothers-in-law, and secondly, that mothers are able to afford confinement care services or domestic helpers.

"The reality is not everyone has the privilege of having parents or in-laws who can assist, and not everyone can afford to pay for confinement care."

Sabrina said Serata found it ironic that MEF had expressed support for the idea of a national vacation week, but put its foot down on paternity leave.

"If employers are serious about retaining their best staff and reducing recruitment costs, they should look at paternity leave as an employment benefit that will persuade people to stay, and not as a cost.

"In fact, studies have shown that a happy, more satisfied employee who is not stressed out about family care issues is much more able to focus on doing better at work.

"Saying that fathers can still bond with their children without the proposed three-day paternity leave is ignoring the problem of absent fathers in Malaysia," she added.