

RESPONSIBILITIES

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE



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Companies should allow employees to work from home, childcare facilities should be a design in new buildings

IT is the school holidays, and I can hear parents, especially mothers, heaving huge sighs of relief. For a month, parents, like me, can kick back and relax and not worry about school runs. Instead of gobbling our dinner so that our children can go to their tuition classes in time, we can actually savour the flavours of our scrumptious home cooked meals and have dessert to boot!

As a working mother, I truly cherish school holidays because this is the only four weeks in a year that I have time for myself. For one, I don't have to wake up in the wee hours to prepare breakfast and battle with the I-don't-want-to-go-to-school tantrums. I also have the liberty to go out for a decent lunch with friends, instead of going through the mad rush of ferrying my children to and from school. In short, this is the month when a huge chunk of my responsibility as a mother is taken off my shoulders.

Women, I believe, take on a lot of responsibilities. Their daily chores are like my mountain load of laundry: never ending. Because of that, they assume many roles and characters at a time and are a pro at multitasking. They manage their time wisely and fill in every possible minute with a task from their to-do list.

For instance: I often find myself editing a speech or evaluating students' assignments while I am in the car, waiting for my son to finish school. My daily routine also sees me replying work emails while preparing dinner. But sometimes, juggling between work and family can be painfully difficult.

During the Crystal Ball session at the Women in Politics (WIP) Conference last week, Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin highlighted a few main issues from his visit to MyWIN Academy, a hub aimed at enculturating innovation for the advancement

and empowerment of women. He said women do not want to have to choose between work and family. The crossroads that some women have to face, for instance, having to choose between attending a kindergarten graduation versus a board of directors' meeting, can be overwhelming.

Would I be a bad mother if I choose work over my children? Would I be an incompetent employee if I put my family first, before work? Women make decisions all the time, from their family's daily meals to finding the best tutors for their children, but most still struggle to find work-life balance. How can we deal with it?

Flexible work arrangements, as Khairy aptly said during WIP, would be a good start. I remember looking at pictures on social media of a member of the European Parliament, Licia Ronzulli of Italy, who attended parliamentary sessions with her daughter. Some commented negatively about her choice to do so, but to me, her decision is an example of how one can find work-life balance that works for them.

When I was doing my PhD in Vienna, I often brought my then few-months-old Aaron for supervision and even to the universi-

ty's computer lab. As I was alone in Europe, Aaron was my sidekick throughout my PhD journey and even almost sat an exam with me. Having my child with me gave me one less thing to worry about. I felt more efficient and productive because my mind was at peace. I also managed my time meticulously, appreciating every moment I had with my growing son, without neglecting my research work.

I commend the decisions by some companies to allow employees to work from home. I applaud Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's decision to allocate funds for childcare facilities in new office buildings.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for instance, has a kindergarten to which I will be sending my daughter. Having her close to my office makes me feel at ease. I also opted to send my elder children to a primary school less than 5km from my office for this very reason.

Sadly, not many have the same privilege. How then can we achieve work-life balance? Where do we start?

Firstly, I am a firm believer that emotional wellbeing is important to ensure a happy household. I have learnt to let go and not be

stressed when I see toys strewn all over the floor in the living room. As for work, I rank it according to priority so that I know what can be put aside to make time for family activities.

I also make a point to try and start doing work only after my children are asleep. More importantly, I reward myself with a caramel latté every time I feel I have successfully faced a particularly challenging day.

It is definitely a bonus to have a very understanding husband and helpful children. This is because sharing responsibilities between family members will help lighten the load and prevent mothers from experiencing burnout.

Khairy also stressed the importance of changing values and attitudes about women. In his own words, "misogyny in Malaysia needs to be addressed".

Society's expectation of women can sometimes be quite overwhelming. Shattering the perception, I believe, is an initiative that requires everyone to chip-



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