

Zomato's big baby step

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It's a dilemma that most HR professionals across the world are constantly wrestling with: What is the ideal leave policy for new parents? Should new mums get three months or six months or even a year off? Should fathers be entitled to the same leave benefits as mothers? As the debate continues, restaurant discovery platform Zomato took a revolutionary step last month when it announced 26 weeks of paid parental leave not just for women but also for men. "There won't be even an iota of difference in parental leave policy for men and women at Zomato going forward," Zomato founder and CEO Deepinder Goyal said in a blog.

Goyal's announcement caused quite a stir in a country where most companies are reluctant to give paternity leave. He went a step forward and said the revised policy was also applicable to non-birthing parents, and cases of surrogacy, adoption, and same-sex partners. The 11-year-old Zomato, valued at \$3.6 billion, will give new parents an endowment of \$1,000 per child.

"There's an African adage—it takes a village to raise a child. And while a village is ideal, a world where both parents are allowed, rather encouraged to assume equal responsibility is a fair start. We will never have truly gender-neutral organisations unless we have gender-neutral communities and gender-neutral nations," he wrote.



Image : Zomato

| Zomato founder and CEO Deepinder Goyal caused a stir with the new parental leave policy

Some global companies such as Bloomberg offer 26 weeks of fully-paid parental leave. But veteran CXO search consultant Priya Chetty-Rajagopal was unable to recall any Indian company that offers paternity leave of over eight weeks. Or for that matter paternal leave for “non-birthing” parents. Bengaluru-based Chetty-Rajagopal, managing partner of Multiversal Advisory, says many companies give time off for a month or two, but not 26 weeks. “Ten years ago, paternity leave was not guaranteed. Today, it is given but the question of duration varies,” adds Ronesh Puri, managing director of recruitment firm Executive Access India.

Under the country’s labour laws, 26 weeks of maternity leave is mandatory, but there aren’t any rules for men or non-birthing couples. “It’s just not a mother’s obligation to take care of a child,” says Meghna Agarwal, 41, co-founder and chief operating officer of IndiQube, a four-year-old flexible workspace operator. Having been her own boss, Agarwal never felt the stress of parenting after her pregnancy. Her husband Rishi Das, who’s the chairman and founder of IndiQube, was constantly by her side. “I get annoyed when people say I’m privileged to have a husband like that. Excuse me, it’s not a privilege. That’s what partners are for,” adds Agarwal.

Goyal believes a lot of the gender-imbalance at the top leadership level in any company stems from an unequal leave policy. “A myopic view of primary care-giving not only alienates one half of our workforce but also creates circumstances that lead to fewer female leaders within organisations, the community, and the nation,” he wrote in his blog post.

Zomato’s parental leave policy has triggered some debate in the business world. Some say long maternity leave deters companies from hiring women and others question the sustainability of such moves, especially in startups. Many startups have more minimalistic HR policies, especially in the early years. India’s startups have a reputation for being more relaxed in their functioning but many do not provide things such as food and transport, which most bigger established companies provide. “What we are seeing are two extremes, startups that are trying to get their head around functions like HR and finance, and those that make work a more welcoming place—for example, by allowing you to bring your pet to work,” adds Chetty-Rajagopal.

Of course, Zomato—which is backed by Ant Financial, an affiliate of China’s \$56-billion Alibaba Group—can hardly be called a startup as it has been around for over a decade. “Zomato is a late-stage startup and their HR policy is, honestly, one-of-a-kind,” says Agarwal.

But the culture is changing thanks to India’s consumer Internet companies. At ecommerce behemoth Flipkart, now owned by U.S. retail giant Walmart, creating a thriving work culture where employees feel valued is top priority for Smriti Krishna Singh, the company’s chief human resources officer. Flipkart gives its employees the freedom to choose working hours

and it was among the first in India to introduce six months' paid maternity leave, two years before it became government policy in 2017. The question is: Will companies like Zomato and Flipkart push others to follow in their footsteps?

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