

Who Cares for Firefighters' Children? Exploring Parental Allowance, Shift Work System, and Gender Dynamics among Firefighters in Taiwan

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This study aims to re-examine the parental leave issues of firefighters in Taiwan, exploring the gender issues arising from parental allowance and shift work system, and their impact on firefighters' families. To this end, the study employs an ethnographic methodology and conducts qualitative interviews. The interviewees are firefighters in Hualien County, including those who have already taken parental leave and those who are about to take it, investigating their thoughts and experiences regarding parental leave.

In 2023, the total number of public servants in Taiwan who received parental leave benefits was 5,347, with 4,479 (83.76%) being female and 868 (16.23%) being male. In the fire services, males are the majority and are considered civil servants. In the Hualien County Fire Department, from 2018 to 2022, there were 3 female and 8 male firefighters who took parental leave. While it may seem that more male firefighters applied for parental leave based on the number, the actual gender ratio of firefighters is approximately only 10-13% female but 87-90% male. This indicates that female firefighters are the primary applicants for parental leave in households, highlighting the challenges faced by male firefighters under the current parental leave policy.

Firstly, the current parental allowance for firefighters is insufficient. The allowance is based on the basic pay and provides 80% of the insurance amount (80% of their non-full gross salary). The limited allowance forces male firefighters to remain at their work posts, resulting in most childcare responsibilities being borne by their female spouses or hiring babysitters to care for their children. This not only exacerbates gender role inequality but also deprives men of their parental rights.

Secondly, the current shift work system for frontline firefighters in Hualien is two days on and two days off, which reduces their time spent with family members. Female spouses are often left to shoulder more housework and childcare responsibilities alone. While the system seems to ensure that firefighters have sufficient rest and adjustment under the high-pressure work environment, it inadvertently increases the family care work of female spouses of male firefighters.

This study is currently being undertaken, and it will explore firefighters' perspectives personal experiences and challenges regarding parental leave through ethnographic interviews. This paper will also examine the policy limitations and the dual challenges posed by the nature of their work that firefighters face under the parental leave policy. Finally, this study will contribute to our understanding of the current state, challenges, and limitations of the implementation of parental leave policies in the firefighting industry in Taiwan, which can serve as a reference for future policy revisions.

Key words: Firefighters, Parental leave, Gender dynamics