

## Changing trends in family structures presents challenges: Tan Chuan Jin

**Imelda Saad**

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Changing trends in family structures in the Republic will present new social challenges for the country. Newly appointed Social and Family Development Minister Tan Chuan-Jin made this point to approximately 450 social service practitioners on Friday (May 22) at the Social Service Partners Conference.

He noted that the proportion of nuclear families has fallen over the years from 56 per cent in the year 2000 to 49 per cent in 2014, and in its place, "a significant increase" in the proportion of one-person households. This is an increase of 3 percentage points from the year 2000 to 11 per cent of all households in 2014.

The number of households with married couples but childless or not living with their children has also gone up by 3 percentage points to 14 per cent, over the same duration of 2000-2014.

Overall, Mr Tan said there are now around 300,000 households which are either childless or do not have their children living with them. He added families are facing new stresses and challenges, such as the sandwich generation, who need to support both children and elderly parents. Values are also changing, with more young couples preferring to move out and live away from their parents.

In addition, he said a small but increasing number of families are facing complex issues, such as divorce and cross-cultural families. Mr Tan said such trends will impact how the Government shapes its policies moving forward.

Said Mr Tan: "These are important trends that we need to track because it will give us a sense of the issues that are before us and therefore from the government perspective, what are the policies that we need to put in place, for us and in the community, what are the things that we can do?"

He added: "Do we begin to also look at extended family? What does it mean when we look at policies? Because often times when we look at children, we provide the support, but then if you don't have children - nieces? Nephews? What does it mean? Should we begin to look at those relationships? And how do we then, for example, from a government policy perspective, support them?"

Conference participants said it makes sense to support them.

**Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "It could be extended by which it's not just about preferential housing applications for children to live next to the parent. Maybe it could include a nephew or a niece who might have some kind of caring interest in that particular person, especially when he does not have a lot of children to depend on. Making some of those things possible, might go a long way."**

One social worker added that notions of the traditional family structure need to change.

"What is our definition of family? Maybe that sacred cow needs to be shifted and expanded so it allows for us as a society to embrace what we call 'adaptive family' - the family that is able to be resilient, be functioning as a family unit, but not necessarily so defined by the blood ties that come with it," said Ms Fazlinda Faroo, centre manager for PPIS Vista Sakinah.

But Mr Tan noted that any policy change will need to be weighed carefully: "You can also imagine how difficult it's going to be to establish that responsibility and also you begin to start thinking, then how do you verify that these nieces, nephews are indeed looking after the old folks? But these are the issues that we have to grapple with because the structures we see evolving will impact on us."

Also, a dialogue session involving the minister discussed work-life balance and how to encourage singles to get married, to address the growing number of single and childless households.

Mr Tan said while the government can do its part, for example, incentivise family-friendly companies - it boils down to work ethics and processes and the willingness for singles, to simply get out and mingle.

About 450 social service practitioners attended the conference.