

Women more sceptical of Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package: IPS study

The results of the study by the Institute of Policy Studies show that compared to men, a smaller percentage of women say paternity leave will influence their family's child-bearing decision.

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Channel NewsAsia, 06 July 2015

More can be done to encourage couples to have children, and help can be targeted at women in their 30s.

These were the findings of a new study by the Institute of Policy Studies released on Monday (Jul 6) to measure the effectiveness of Singapore's Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package. The package was enhanced in 2013, in a bid to lift the country's total fertility rate (TFR).

The budget for the Marriage and Parenthood package has quadrupled from S\$500 million since 2001 to S\$2 billion in 2013. New measures include the Parenthood Priority Scheme for setting up a home, Medisave grant for newborns, as well as paternity, and shared parental leave.

Still, there has not been much of a bump in Singapore's TFR, which now stands at 1.25. It has been below replacement levels since 1977.

"Things have changed over the course of the last 15 years, what we have seen is a very significant increase in people's education, particularly women. Their expectations are changing," said Mr Christopher Gee, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

WOMEN MORE 'SCEPTICAL' OF POLICIES

The study, which covered 2,000 men and women aged between 21 and 49, showed that women tend to be more sceptical. For example, on the much-lauded paternity leave, half of the men who have not taken the leave said it will influence their family's child-bearing decision, while only about 40 per cent of women think so.

In contrast, the figures shot up to 65 per cent for men and 64 per cent for women, among couples whose husbands have taken paternity leave.

The statistics were similar for perceptions over shared parental leave. Among couples who have not used any shared parental leave, 48 per cent of men said it will influence their family's child-bearing decisions, while only 41 per cent of women felt the same. The numbers went up to 54 per cent for men and 54 per cent for women, among couples who have used shared parental leave.

Mr Gee said women may need a little more help with reconciling conflicting expectations of career, with traditional assumptions of motherhood.

"Women were less likely to say measures were influential, the package was conducive, than men. This highlights the gender divide between men and women's attitudes and perceptions

about child-bearing. They are a little bit more concerned about the whole process of having a child than men,” said Mr Gee.

“What we need to do from here is to really think about what women want and the barriers that women face today in terms of having a child. Maybe what women want are things like childcare, and also facilitating their re-entry into the workforce,” he added.

HUSBANDS GET BIGGER SHARE OF MATERNITY LEAVE?

He adds that employers can look at more flexible work options to help ease the entry of mothers back to work. He also suggested a more radical policy: For husbands to be allowed to share more of his wife's 16-week maternity leave. Currently, it is capped at one week.

"Maternity leave is shared with the husband and it could be shared with up to eight weeks. Perhaps with the husband such that the load and the burden of looking after a child can be discussed and decided between the couple and if it is appropriate for the couple, they could share it equally," said Mr Gee.

So you can end up with the husband having nine weeks of paternity leave and the wife with eight. And she then can go back into the workforce a lot quicker, if that's the way that the couple decides.”

Mr Gee added that such a move may also, over time, change gender stereotypes as well as traditional roles within the family.

"You don't change social attitudes overnight but over time, as more people take up this option, their co-workers might think, 'My co-worker has done this successfully, maybe I should try it too, when I have my child'," said Mr Gee.

“And then over time, their children will also have the experience of much more equal relationship and burden sharing within the family and they can say 'Actually my dad was an equal partner in raising me!' And then when they themselves have kids, they adopt that perspective.”

The study also showed that the older couples get, the less likely they will perceive the Marriage and Parenthood package as being effective. As Singaporeans are marrying at a later age, researchers said measures should be targeted at women in their 30s.

“You practically have a 10- to 12-year gap period for maximum policy effectiveness,” said Mr Gee. “Women, men in their 30s are just at the peak of their earnings potential and getting more in their careers and women, making their choice to step away from that, to have a child, that's a very large decision to make. So, give them the means to get back into their career as soon as they can. That certainly means childcare at an early age, so below three, and getting back to the workforce, maybe part time work. And the leave, we can certainly play around with it.”

IS IT JUST A MATTER OF MONEY?

The top three measures deemed most influential by those aged between 30 and 39 are maternity leave, the parenthood tax rebate and extended childcare leave.

The Singapore Government has been doling out cash gifts for a couple's first to fourth child.

As part of the Marriage and Parenthood Package 2013, the cash gift quantum for children born on or after Aug 26, 2012, has been increased and the payment schedule revised and shortened. Couples get a cash gift of up to S\$6,000 each for their first and second child and S\$8,000 each for their third and fourth child. The cash gift will be disbursed in three instalments over 12 months from the birth of the child, to help parents defray the new or additional expenses arising from their newborn.

"I think this is really a matter of expectations. So changed expectations, plus the cost of raising a child has changed - it's gone up. So you probably have to think of that also," said Mr Gee.

"The question is, is this what people really do want? More money? And if more money is it, then why hasn't it had an impact over the course of the last 15 years when the Marriage and Parenthood package has increased, the cash gift has increased also? It really is not it, probably. You need to give it but at the end of the day, if you don't continue to increase it, double, it, triple it, I don't think it will really have a significant impact."

Researchers said there may be a boost in the birth rate over the next decade, thanks to a larger cohort of women who are the children of late Baby Boomers and who will be in their 30s. They will be in their optimal child-bearing years within the next decade.