

Singapore Families: Risk and Protective Factors

By Varian Lim
IPS Research Analyst

The family can be a source of one's happiness or sadness, and family life has both its bright moments and downsides. Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, the Head of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab, made these comments at a workshop entitled "Singapore Families: Risk and Protective Factors" on 29 January 2016. The aim of the workshop was to highlight and discuss issues faced by Singapore families, such as changing family structure, youths-at-risk, caregiving and family violence, as well as the increasing trend of transnational families. Around 200 participants, including academics, civil servants and social workers, attended the two panel sessions at the workshop. It was organised by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Arts and Social Sciences Faculty's Social Science and Policy (SSP) cluster, and the IPS Social Lab.

Deputy Head of IPS Social Lab, Senior Research Fellow Dr Leong Chan-Hoong moderated the first session, and Prof. Tan, who is also chair of the SSP cluster, moderated the second session.

In opening the workshop, Prof. Tan emphasised that this workshop would provide a rare opportunity to get a sensing on the state of family relations and dynamics from individuals who were both experts and practitioners in different domains concerning the family. Prof Tan ended his remarks by posing this question to the audience: "If we have a chance to choose our family, would it be the family we now have?"

Panel 1: Family Relations

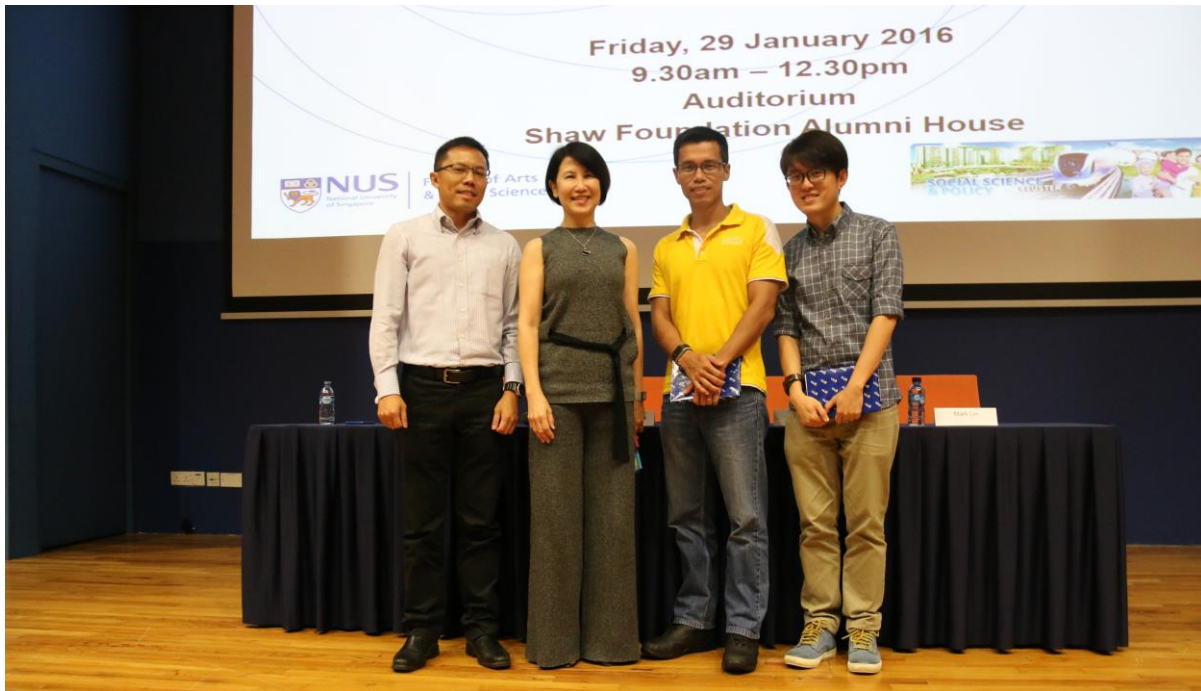
Charlotte Beck, Senior Director of the Family Development Group in the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), gave an overview of the current landscape of families in Singapore. Although nuclear families remain the dominant household structure, there is a sharp increase in one-person households and married couples who are childless or without children living with them. Furthermore, the number of households with at least one member aged 65 and above increases yearly due to Singapore's ageing population. To address these emerging trends, two studies were recently commissioned by MSF, one to investigate the role of extended family members in providing support and care to the elderly, and the other on divorced, widowed seniors in Singapore. Ms Beck articulated the need to develop a framework to protect seniors and ageing persons with special needs as well as future-ready legislation to support ageing families. There are current plans to amend the Mental Capacity Act to allow professionals such as lawyers or social workers (referred to as professional donees or deputies) to act as proxy decision-makers for those without next-of-kin, and to

introduce the Vulnerable Adults Act to protect individuals who are abused by family members or are unable to care for themselves.

The next speaker was Joe Chan, Centre Head of REACH Youth Powerhouse, who highlighted the challenges in working with teenagers. He first described the typical profile of a teenager as one who yearns for independence, is on the brink of adulthood, and is willing to test boundaries and limits. Next, he identified the stresses that youth face in Singapore. In particular, they are uncertain about their future and find it [very or extremely stressful](#). Mr Chan said this was unsurprising due to the rising cost of living, as teenagers worry about supporting themselves and their ageing parents in the future. REACH Youth Powerhouse hopes to strengthen the social and emotional competencies of youths-at-risk and young offenders through structured programmes and informal interactions, as research has shown that having these competencies predict achievement and success later in life. He advocated a mind-set shift when working with youths-at-risk, as usual counselling techniques that focus on their negatives and problems are ineffectual. Practitioners should instead explore alternative possibilities and build on the existing strengths of these youths, allowing them to make their own choices and in the process become independent.

Mark Lin, Deputy Director of Special Projects (Eldercare) under Montfort Care, touched on caregiving as the main problem faced by seniors and adult children, in determining who should be responsible for caregiving, and how this responsibility is shared. Mr Lin outlined the typical profile of [caregivers](#); they are usually the care receiver's children and middle aged. He explained singles are over-represented and that caregiving falls on their shoulders, as other family members may be married with their own children, and thus have other responsibilities to manoeuvre. In addition, singles who stay with their parents are naturally allocated caregiving roles. Mr Lin opined that there is a fine balance between state intervention and families that need caregiving. The government has identified gaps in caregiving and is increasing state support by building more nursing homes and day care centres. This helps to reduce caregiving stresses and burdens faced by families. However, he warned that it may erode the sense of familial duty and obligation as more families may send their parents to nursing homes.

During the question-and-answer (Q&A) session, a participant asked where the professional donees and deputies would come from. Ms Beck replied that there were two options: One where lawyers and social workers volunteer and are appointed as panel deputies to cater for kinless individuals found to be mentally incapacitated, while the other is more organisational-based. A participant pointed out that caregivers are still predominantly female, and asked Mr Lin about the extent that this factors into fairness and caregiving responsibilities. Mr Lin noted that caregivers being mainly female is an international phenomenon, and attributes this to social and cultural contexts, where caregiving duties are assigned to females as they tend to be less educated and are traditionally seen as homemakers. However, he remarked that the problem is not so much about females doing caregiving but how caregiving has a low status in society when it should be seen as an honourable endeavour.



Left to Right: Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, Charlotte Beck, Joe Chan and Mark Lin.

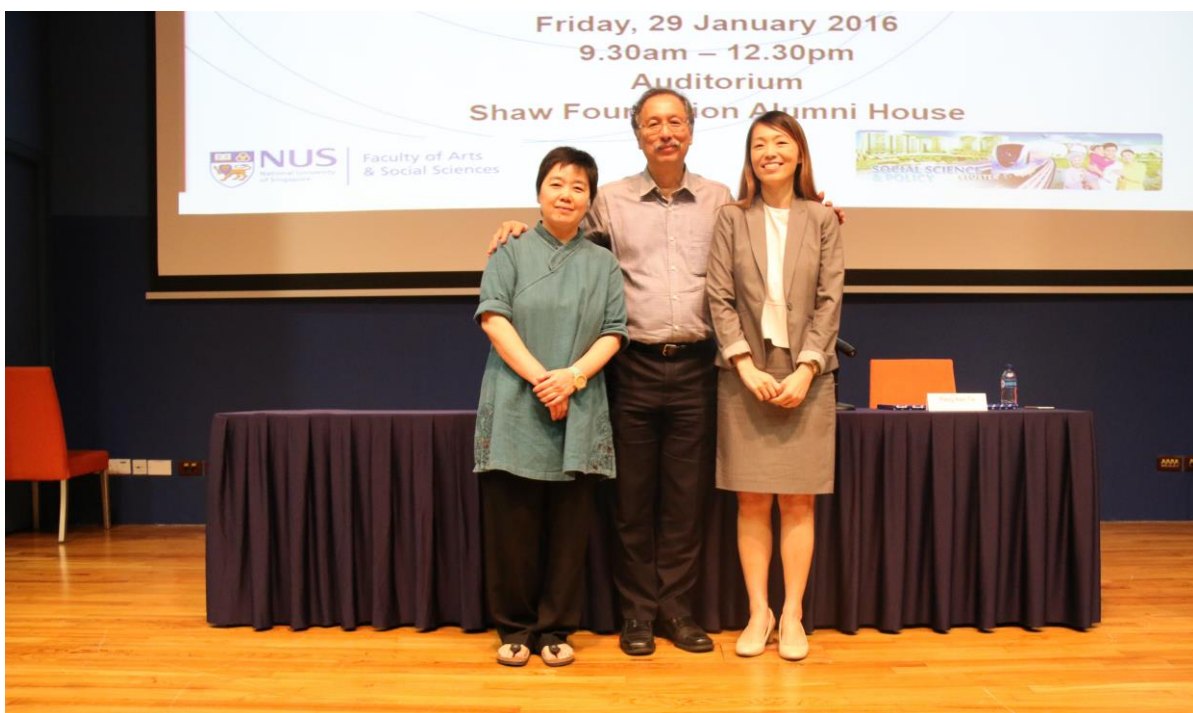
Panel 2: Family Dynamics

The first speaker of the second panel, Agnes Chia, Group Director of Family and Community Services under Care Corner Singapore, gave her views on the increasing trend of transnational marriages in Singapore. These account for almost a third of all marriages. Ms Chia attributed this rise to regional economic disparities, marriages being outsourced, and a shift away from traditional Asian feminine ideals, where females play a subservient role and provide caregiving and domestic duties. She pinpointed that this is particularly evident in migrant brides, who are usually from developing Asian countries and are looking for hypergamy, the act of marrying someone who is of a higher social status or wealthier than oneself. Marriages involving migrant brides are therefore unequal and transactional in nature, where the local husband often demands that the bride fulfil his familial needs. This has implications for policies and practice, and Ms. Chia recommended that such marriages be transformed into sentimental ones with equal partnership. One of her suggestions is to relook immigration laws, where migrant brides are often on long-term visit passes sponsored by their husbands. This gives husbands the unilateral power to cancel the pass at any time, which causes the migrant bride to be deported without any recourse.

The second speaker, Pang Kee Tai, Deputy Director from the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (PAVE), asked the audience if there could be positive outcomes for families facing domestic violence, where perpetrators are still overwhelmingly male. Her own answer was “no” according to existing literature that suggested that recidivism rate was high. Even with intervention programmes, domestic violence tends to reoccur after one year. However, Ms. Pang brought the good news that there were positive outcomes in our local context, where two-thirds of perpetrators on the mandatory counselling programme had completed it successfully with no reoccurrence of domestic violence. The mandatory order is effective because it sends the clear message that violence is not tolerated in Singapore, and

gives perpetrators access to rehabilitation, which plays a key role in preserving family ties. Ms Pang commented that community services and the network of treatment programmes, along with laws that offer protection and consequences, stop violence and help families return to a peaceful state. By providing men who abuse with the appropriate support to change their destructive behaviour, women and children do not have to suffer further consequences of domestic violence.

A participant posed a question to Ms Pang during the Q&A segment with regard to victims of domestic violence committed by their own children, and asked if there were accessible centres for such victims to seek help more easily. Ms Pang said that such victims would have the same access to laws and general public services such as the police, family service centres and counselling programmes. They could also apply for a personal protection order at the Protection Order Services of the Family Court or go to any of the family violence service centres. Ms Chia on the other hand was asked by a member of the audience about the challenges faced by children of transnational marriages. One challenge which Ms Chia identified was when migrant brides were threatened with and subsequently deported by their husbands, which resulted in children being separated from their mothers who were often their primary caregivers. There are instances where this separation leads to child neglect as the husband is unable to take care of the child. Social workers often have to request the husband to suggest extended family members who can step in to take over childcare.



Left to Right: Pang Kee Tai, Dr Tan Ern Ser and Agnes Chia.

Varian Lim is a Research Analyst at IPS Social Lab, an independent centre for social indicators research.

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