

## **It's 2021. Why do women continue to take on a disproportionate burden of caregiving?**

**Soft truths to keep Singapore from stalling.**

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COMMENTARY: Much has been said about Singapore's low fertility rates. But what are the underlying reasons, and what can be done about to increase it?

Corinna Lim, executive director of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) and the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 8th S R Nathan Fellow, addressed these questions on May 14, in the second lecture of her series "Gender Equality: The Time Has Come".

She highlighted the gender disparity present in caretaking, both for children and the elderly, and called for the implementation of policy changes.

More information on the series, as well as a recording of Lim's full speech, are available in the IPS website [here](#).

We have reproduced an excerpt of her speech "The Caring Economy" below.

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### **By Corinna Lim**

The main norm we have to change is this idea: "Men should be the primary breadwinner, and women the primary caregiver of the family."

Caregiving for our young and old is central to three essential issues: our low fertility rate, women leaving the workforce prematurely, and care for our ageing population.

Getting men to share the care more equally at home is part of the solution. And I believe many men are ready and want to do this. With the right laws and support from employers, we can make this happen.

What Singapore needs is a robust care infrastructure to support our families' care needs — both childcare and eldercare. Without a strong care infrastructure, our economy and our society just won't tick.

### **Care work as actual work**

Family care work, that is generally carried out by women, doesn't get counted.

And so, it doesn't count. It doesn't count in the GDP, and continues to be overlooked and undervalued by policymakers.

Yet capitalism depends upon this very work. Without people caring for the workers, the economy would collapse!

We caught a glimpse of this when schools and childcare closed during the lockdown. Care and work then collided under one roof — people's homes.

Without childcare, parents were struggling to get anything else done, with their kids at home. Many men also realised for the first time how much caregiving and housework their wives were doing, on top of their paid work.

The point is, if we don't see the caregiving being done, because we are outside working or it is taken care of by someone else, we may just not realise how much work there is, and how important it is.

### **Singapore's low fertility rate**

Singapore's Total Fertility Rate, or TFR, is today at an all-time low — 1.10 children per woman. Replacement rate is 2.1. All developed countries have gone below 2.1, but not as low as us.

Lower fertility rates aren't necessarily all bad. It is partly a sign of how women and men are finding fulfilment in other areas, beyond raising a family.

But, our [TFR at 1.10](#) is considered to be dangerously low.

The main concern to address is this: **How do we support the people who want kids to fulfil their parenthood aspirations?**

The government's 2016 Marriage and Parenthood Survey showed that **92 per cent** of married couples would like to have at least two kids. **37 per cent** did not achieve their ideal.

The issue is not just money. It's also about time, stress, and the actual work of giving care.

The pro-natal incentives were mainly in the form of family leave and monetary incentives [such as] baby bonuses, tax breaks, and subsidies for preschool.

Leave is essential, of course, and money is always welcome. But the actual burden of caregiving, especially the burden on mothers, was still not addressed.

## **Women leave workforce to care for children**

Girls have overtaken boys in education. Girls do better in schools and, on average, have better educational qualifications. But what happens when women and men enter the workforce?

What we see is that between the ages 25 and 54, close to 100 per cent of men are in the workforce. They start retiring in their mid-50s.

The [female] line peaks at about 90 per cent in the 25 to 29 age group. From 30 to 34, it starts to go downhill.

The median age of first-time mothers is 30.6 years old. Unlike men, women's ability to work is hampered by child rearing.

Women dropping out of the labour force is a waste of human potential, especially given that, on average, Singapore women are more highly educated than men.

So we must try to do better.

## **Brunt of caregiving work borne by women**

The issues of women's workforce participation and Singapore's low fertility rates boils down to one thing: the expectation that women, who are now educated and have careers, will continue to bear the brunt of the caregiving burden, as they did in the past.

This expectation sets up a situation where women have to choose between their careers and their children. Some give up their careers for family. Others choose career over family.

Either way, it's not ideal for Singapore. We end up with both low fertility and women leaving the workforce prematurely.

There are two things that governments can do to increase fertility and women's workforce participation:

The first: embed gender equality into laws and policies. In particular, use parental leave policies to nudge husbands to be more active fathers. What I call the Gender Equality solution.

The second: build a robust Care Infrastructure to support all families' caregiving needs.

## **Fathers should be given more paternity leave**

Research has shown that dads who are actively involved in the early months of their kids' lives are much more likely to be active fathers in later years.

These men also share domestic work and paid work more equitably with their partners beyond the paternity leave period.

As part of its pro-natal measures, Singapore extended paternity leave to two weeks in 2017. Last year, 53 per cent of men took their leave.

To me, this is a positive sign of how social norms are changing quite rapidly. More fathers have become active parents although mums still do the bulk of the work at home.

Two weeks paternity leave was a good start, but I think of it as a pilot — it is insufficient for fathers who really want to be equal parents. How much can a person do in two weeks? That might just be enough time for fathers to get the hang of things.

While not every man is ready to take more than two weeks of paternity leave, our policies should support those who are keen to do so. And those who are not going to take it, so be it — it's their loss.

The other unsatisfactory issue about the current leave is the disparity between mothers' and fathers' leave. Currently, mothers have four months' maternity leave. Fathers have two weeks' [paternity leave].

This huge disparity reinforces the idea that child rearing is primarily the mum's role. It goes against the idea of gender equality and also hurts women's career prospects.

Ultimately, we should aim for a situation where all parents have the same amount of parenting leave, regardless of gender. If mums have four months, dads should have four months too. But this needs long term consideration and planning as employers will be greatly impacted by this.

In the meantime, here is my recommendation to equalise paternity leave: **Increase fathers' entitlement from two weeks to three months; maintain mothers' leave at four months. Cap the total paid leave for the family at six months.**

What this means is that parents can decide for themselves. If they want to do 50:50, they can do that — three months for mums and three months for dad. Or, 60:40 — four months for mums and two months for dads.

## **Husbands should also be allowed to apply for maintenance**

In line with the idea that fathers should be equal parents or sometimes even stay-at-home parents, we should also amend the Women's Charter to equalise men's rights to seek maintenance from their wives.

Currently, Section 69 of the Women's Charter only allows husbands to apply for maintenance from their wives if they are incapacitated. Wives have an unfettered right to apply for maintenance from their husbands.

The provision reflects the old patriarchal norm that men were primary breadwinners and had a duty to maintain their wives.

It is time to update this provision and give men the same rights as women to apply for maintenance.

### **Need to build a more robust childcare infrastructure**

In the late 70s, when the government realised that family caregiving was hindering women's participation in the workforce, it launched the Foreign Maid Scheme to enable families to employ foreign domestic workers.

At this point, the State didn't invest in building public childcare for all families. The private market saw this opportunity and seized it, offering a range of services which cost as much as S\$2000 per child at the high end.

Our excellent social infrastructure in education, housing, healthcare and transport has been the cornerstone of our economic success. Why did the government, at first instance, not invest in building a strong childcare infrastructure in the same way that it built a strong education system?

Private solutions may seem very attractive. It saves the government from having to take on the burden of managing or providing these services. However, relying on the market to provide solutions to fulfil basic human needs like childcare is deeply concerning, as it increases social inequality.

It is only in 2013 that the government really focused its attention on childcare provision, when it set up the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).

Since then, the state has made great progress in building the preschool infrastructure, including improving the quality of preschool services, making it more affordable and accessible, [and] creating the KidSTART programme to support the healthy development of kids from low-income families.

We had a late start, and there is still some catching up to do. Hopefully the [infant care] situation too should get better by 2025.

## **Ageing population**

Singaporeans are living longer almost than any other nationality. The average life expectancy in 1957 was 64, and today it is 84.

If managed well, our ageing population may indeed be our only "increasing natural resource". But usually, when people talk about ageing and our ageing population, it's with a sense of dread, apprehension, and anxiety.

The images that we associate in our mind with ageing are those of illness, disability, vulnerability, and the sacrifices and burden of caregiving.

The question is: "Does our current infrastructure support the people who need care and the people who give care, to enable us to benefit from longevity?"

AWARE's research in this area shows the following trends emerging:

- Many family members, usually women, are giving up their jobs to take care of their relatives.
- These family caregivers are mostly in their 50s. They are not just disadvantaged by their loss of income and on-going expenses during the period that they are full-time caregivers. Many of them disrupted their careers before they built up enough savings for themselves, when they grow old.

Once again, we undervalue care, and are not investing enough to build a robust elder care infrastructure.

## **Government must ensure services are available to everyone**

When I say build a care infrastructure, I don't mean that it has to be a HDB model where the government owns everything.

The private sector will have a role to play, but the government must be involved to oversee, fund, manage, as necessary, to ensure that the services are universally accessible to everyone. So, it could be like our education model or childcare model.

I strongly, strongly urge the government to review its approach to long-term care. There is a lot at stake for the economy and our society if we don't invest enough, and soon enough, to support our family caregivers.

## **Envisioning a more equal future for caretaking**

Come with me as we journey into the future: the year is 2050.

Fathers talk about how they see life differently. They talk about how they want to be the best person they can be, for their kids.

We see a lot more children these days. The fertility rate has turned the corner. Our TFR is now at 1.25.

Also, we now have a great childcare system. Childcare quality improved every year. Kids with disabilities now attend the same childcare as other kids. Singapore is now among the top for 5 childcare systems in the world.

Children are enjoying school more. No more PSLE exam. Primary school is more fun. The kids also learn about equality and respect for each other.

Singapore has become a silver haired paradise. Silver is in. Silver haired men and women everywhere, economically active, contributing in many ways, from the Cabinet to boardrooms, malls, fast food counters, and new community centres.

So, that's what I see of the Singapore of 2050.

Do you think this is possible? It's important to be able to dream of the society that we want for ourselves. Now, let's all work to make that dream come true.