

The changing Singapore family

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The Straits Times, 1 June 2015

Singapore is not alone in observing changes to its family structure. In the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the proportion of one-person households and couples without children is expected to increase dramatically.

The 2011 Future Of Families To 2030 report predicts that around 40 per cent of all households will be one-person households.

These single-person household structures are already noticeable in Singapore, too.

Last year, single-person households constituted 11.2 per cent of all resident households, up from 8.2 per cent in 2000.

There has been a 4-percentage-point rise in households with married couples but no children over the same period, although it is not clear how many are indeed childless.

The transformations in Singapore's family structure have obvious consequences.

For instance, they have a direct impact on the availability of informal support networks for the elderly. This is significant, given the ageing population.

Since reliance on the state to provide for the welfare needs of the elderly is untenable in Singapore, the strength of the family institution to care for its members is crucial.

Indeed, based on several nationally representative surveys over the years, there is good reason to believe that families in Singapore are strong.

So there is hope that despite demographic changes, families will adapt appropriately to meet the welfare needs of their members.

The 2013 Ministry of Social and Family Development's Survey of Social Attitudes of Singaporeans (SAS), released last Tuesday, showed that over 90 per cent of respondents reported that they had close-knit families. This was across different age groups.

Close family ties also extend to relationships with relatives, with 80 per cent saying they maintained ties with relatives.

The positive sentiments Singaporeans have towards their immediate and extended families increase the propensity that they will be involved in one another's lives, especially when the need arises.

A second indicator of family strength is the presence of intergenerational contact.

Based on data from an HDB survey in 2013, there were high levels of contact between elderly residents and their married children - the great majority had contact at least once a month.

Only about 13 per cent of respondents had less contact than this.

Third, Singaporeans mobilise family resources to take care of emotional and instrumental needs.

In 2013, 95 per cent of participants in the SAS survey agreed with the statement: "I will give money to my family members if they are in need of financial support." Many Singaporeans also view family as a source of emotional support.

A total of 83 per cent said that when they were troubled, they would talk to one or more of their family members.

Fourth, strong family values exist among the population.

When it comes to the value of filial obligation, Singaporeans across age groups endorsed the statement posed to them in the SAS survey: "Regardless of the qualities and faults of one's parents, one must always love and respect them."

Even among millennials - those below 30 years of age - who many say have abandoned formerly cherished values, 96 per cent affirmed this statement of unconditional love for one's parents.

Participants in the National Youth Survey in 2013 said maintaining a strong family relationship was a very important life goal.

This was the view of 71 per cent of the 2,843 people between 15 and 34 years surveyed, and was a larger proportion than those stating that having a successful career was very important.

Finally, Singaporeans generally eschew behaviours that jeopardise the building of strong family units.

Thus the great majority, as shown in a 2013 Institute of Policy Studies survey, were not in favour of extra-marital relationships or out-of-wedlock pregnancies, with 80.3 per cent and 72.5 per cent respectively disapproving of such behaviour.

Clearly, Singaporeans aspire to care for their families and are committed to the family institution.

But their ability to be a bedrock of support for family members will be affected by demographic and social trends.

Several things can be done to mitigate the challenges posed by these trends.

These include greater gender equality, with men participating more in caregiving, which will allow both men and women to share the burden.

The 2013 SAS survey shows that 51 per cent of women said they did more caregiving tasks than their husbands, while only 4 per cent of men said this.

To this end, workplaces must continue to find ways to foster family-friendly cultures where their employees can discharge both their duties to work and to their families.

While businesses are increasingly accepting that women are conflicted with their dual roles at work and home, there must be recognition that more men now want to be involved with their family.

On the policy front, public housing should continue to accommodate families who need to live in close proximity with one another.

And families in conflict need better assistance from social services, so that their relationships are preserved.

Accelerated changes in family structures need not be overly disconcerting to Singaporeans.

There are ways in which we can maintain the strength and resilience of family ties.

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