

Life stages and S'pore's baby woes

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The Straits Times, 19 February 2011

ON JAN 17, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng announced at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference that the country's total fertility rate (TFR) had fallen to 1.16 last year, a further slide from 1.22 in 2009.

Should Singapore worry about the new TFR figure? Perhaps not, because this could be a temporary phenomenon. The reason is that the TFR is computed based on the number of births in a given year. There is evidence to suggest that Singaporeans postponed child-bearing in the face of the 2008-2009 economic uncertainties.

An IPS poll of 2,100 married Singapore citizens and permanent residents of reproductive ages 20 to 49, conducted in September 2009, found that the economic crisis had affected the child-bearing decisions of 18 per cent of those interviewed. Of these, about two-thirds said they would resume child-bearing when the economy improved. Of the one-third who would not have any more children, age and cost were the main reasons they cited for their decision.

Another reason for the downturn could be the 'Tiger Year' effect - a phenomenon that affects Chinese populations in particular - as demonstrated by the similarities between Singapore's TFR and those of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Be that as it may, the persistence of an extremely low TFR in Singapore deserves further attention. It has implications for the speed of ageing and decline of the population. We need to examine the factors behind more Singaporeans not marrying, or, having married, not having more children.

Strangely enough, when surveyed, Singaporeans expressed an almost universal desire to marry and to have two to three children. Why then do they not achieve their desire?

Barriers are often linked to time and financial constraints. In this regard, the Government has, since 1987, introduced and enhanced various measures to support Singaporeans in their quest for marriage and babies. In 2004, these were packaged and enhanced to create an overall family-friendly environment providing support at each step of family formation. The Marriage and Parenthood (M&P) Package was again enhanced in August 2008. DPM Wong revealed at the time the 2008 package was announced that the budget for the package was expected to be \$1.6 billion when fully implemented, double that for the 2004 package.

The IPS poll disclosed that a majority (62 per cent) felt that the package was adequate. When asked if the package was conducive for couples to have children, 79 per cent felt that it was. In response to another question as to whether the package was conducive to themselves having children, 53 per cent responded positively. Among the 13 per cent who felt that the package was not adequate, the two most common suggestions for improvement were for more subsidies to cover education costs and for further improvements to the Baby Bonus scheme.

The recent decline in the TFR was followed by calls to further enhance M&P measures. However, we should also examine the wider environment in which the young live their lives

today. Research in the West has shown that the path to adulthood is longer and more difficult for today's young compared to that for earlier generations. This has been brought about by broader trends such as globalisation, economic restructuring and changes in the labour market, and improvements in information and communication technology that facilitate movements of capital, jobs and, to a certain extent, people.

In the face of stiffer competition, the young are remaining in school longer. They are dependent on their parents for a longer period of time, and leave their homes and establish themselves later.

It is perhaps not realistic to reverse the upward trend in the age at which people marry. Nevertheless, Singaporeans should be reminded not to postpone marriage and child-bearing for too long. The biological clock has not changed and the risks of childbirth increase with age.

What is needed is perhaps a change in view of the life-course as comprising a uni-directional progression from education to work to family formation. This should be accompanied by greater flexibility or ease of movement between these life stages. Given the pace of technological change, one cannot predict all the skills that will be required for work 20 years down the road, for example; the future of work may be such that to stay relevant, one has to constantly move between work and education/training.

Flexibility in moving between work, family and education may be the way to go in the future. In this, the Government, employers, the young and families all have a part to play.

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