

Eleventh Family Research Network Forum: “Home Alone – Life after Divorce in Singapore”

28 April 2014

The Family Research Network (FRN) Forum is an initiative to bring together academics, researchers and policymakers to discuss family research through a series of closed-door sessions. A total of 190 participants from government, social service sector and academia attended the 11th FRN Forum in April 2014.

It began with four presentations and these were followed by a Question and Answer (Q&A) session.

Presentation 1: “We are doing okay, aren’t we?” — Divorce trends and single parenthood” by Rahayu Buang (Deputy Director, Family Policy Unit, Family Development Group, Ministry of Social and Family Development)

Ms Rahayu presented top-line statistics on divorces in Singapore, gaps in social support, and current intervention measures by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

Statistics on divorce

On the whole, Singapore’s crude divorce rate of 1.9 divorces per 1,000 resident population in 2012 compared fairly well against other nations such as Austria, China and Norway. Looking at the divorce rates among local marriage cohorts, however, a rising trend could be observed among more recent cohorts.

The changing attitudes towards divorce were cited as possibly the main reason for this trend. These include a greater acceptance and thus reduced stigmatisation and even celebration of divorces. Higher educational attainment was also cited as resulting in couples being less economically dependent on each other.

Currently, there are approximately 7,000 marital dissolutions¹ annually. Two in three divorces in 2012 involved children, with the great majority of cases involving at least one to two children.

A review of the literature on the impact of divorces elsewhere showed that the negative impact on children could arise from financial strains and the quality of co-parenting that is affected by hostility between parents. When these children grow up, they generally have less satisfaction with life, lower psychological well-being and face difficulties forming stable relationships.

Current measures put in place by the MSF

The MSF works in partnership with agencies such as schools and workplaces to provide support at every life stage. A total of 24 volunteer welfare organisations (VWOs) provide secular marriage preparation programmes for adult couples, with topics ranging from communication to handling in-law issues. This is over and above the number of religious organisations that provide marriage preparation programmes.

1. Dissolution includes divorces and annulments.

For couples intending to divorce, Muslim and civil divorces involve different processes. While Muslims have to undergo mandatory marriage counselling in the pre-filing stage, couples can do so at their own initiative prior to civil divorces. In court, mandatory mediation is required for all parties in Muslim divorces and for parties with children aged 14 and younger in civil divorces.

After divorce, support is given at various stages. An interesting development regarding maintenance was that provisions for enforcement were enhanced in 2011, including new penalties for defaulting on maintenance payments and empowering complainants to report the maintenance owed at DP SME Credit Bureau (which effectively constitutes a bad credit report and acts as a deterrent to the defaulting party).

Another common issue post-divorce is housing. A recent policy amendment waived the requirement for an ex-spouse's consent when purchasing a new flat within three years of the divorce, provided the party has legal custody of all of the children and the children are all below 18 years of age at the date of the divorce. Since housing can be a significant issue, a new referral programme was started in January this year where the courts can refer parties to relevant HDB Branch Offices for guidance on post-divorce housing options.

Gaps in social support

Ms Rahayu highlighted four main gaps: (i) the divorce process sometimes neglects the child's view or discusses this too late into the process; (ii) having no centralised resource point for divorce results in a lack of access to information; (iii) parties may not be aware of their housing options; and (iv) there is a lack of specialist skills in the social service sector.

In conclusion, Singapore's divorce rate compared well with other nations, suggesting that the current measures in place are sound. Despite that, there are some gaps in the support framework that can be addressed to better ease the transition into single parenthood.

Presentation 2: “‘The whole village must help’ — Examining the effectiveness of social support for Singaporean divorced parents” by Dr Sharon Quah (Postdoctoral Fellow, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore)

This presentation was based on Dr Quah's PhD research project, which involved a qualitative study on Australian and Singaporean divorcees. For the purpose of this presentation, only data from interviews with 25 Singaporean divorced parents were covered. Dr Quah explored how these divorced parents worked out their post-divorce lives and acquired the support they needed for self-sufficiency and stability.

Dr Quah explained that when a divorce takes place, divorcees have to design what she calls a “divorce biography” and decide on their future paths. As part of determining their divorce biographies, they need to: (i) dissolve the marriage; (ii) cope with the changes and challenges divorce brings; (iii) negotiate the risks of this life-changing event; (iv) redesign and re-orientate their lives; and (v) make plans for the future.

Her presentation looked at a specific aspect of divorce biographies, that is, acquiring post-divorce support in three locations: personal community of family and friends; the school system; and the workplace. She explored both the productive and precarious aspects of her respondents' experiences.

Personal community of family and friends

While this group can be an important resource, it could also be a source of stress and discrimination in some cases. As a result, some divorcees chose to move away from

unsupportive family members who made frequent hurtful remarks. However, some of them did reconnect with their family members later, out of familial obligations or responsibility to their children.

Dr Quah also found that divorcees solved childcare issues by creating a support network of kin and friends by looking for other parent figures or caregivers to help fill the role previously played by the ex-spouse. Grandparents providing childcare assistance was an important support for the divorcee and possibly pivotal in the decision to dissolve the marriage.

In Singapore, it is commonly accepted that with the dissolution of marriage, divorcees will move back to live with their parents. This is not surprising due to the small size of Singapore, high property prices and divorcees' limited access to government-subsidised flats. However, while most found it better to move back to live with their parents for financial, childcare and emotional support, some might find moving back to their parents' home stressful. The latter either buy over the matrimonial home and remain there with the children, or acquire their own housing once they can afford to do so.

School system

The school plays an important role in the support of the school-going child. Children from divorced families could be placed together to share their experiences, fears and their relationships with their divorced parents. On the other hand, children from single-parent families could face discrimination and bullying in school due to negative social attitudes towards them. Dr Quah suggested that the lack of open discussions on alternative family arrangements in schools could be a contributing factor for the lack of acceptance of persons in such situations.

In addition, some educators might also lack sensitivity towards a divorce arrangement. One interviewee shared the difficulty she faced while trying to register her child for primary school. Apart from an uncooperative ex-spouse, the school system did not display sensitivity and insisted on obtaining the father's signature on the registration form and taking the father's address as the address of residence for the child instead of the main caregiver's.

Workplace

Supervisors can ease the stress and demonstrate support to divorced parents by allowing flexible work arrangements. Colleagues can also play a role. While divorce appears to be more socially accepted, some interviewees shared that stigma, passive aggressiveness and discrimination still existed at work.

In conclusion, as long as the society moralises against divorce, the issues and challenges faced by divorcees will remain unnoticed and unaddressed. They will continue to face discrimination and alienation in their everyday life. While preventive measures are necessary to build strong marriages, protective measures to support divorcees and their families are equally important. Protective measures would allow divorcees to quickly overcome the difficulties of divorce and enable them to become productive citizens. Children will also benefit from such measures by lowering the risk associated with single-parent households.

Presentation 3: “Challenges and coping of single Indian mothers — Findings from Project Athena” by Dr Mathew Mathews (Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore)

This presentation was based on a sample of 441 divorced and abandoned low-income Indian Singaporean mothers who were receiving financial assistance from Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA). Responses from divorced mothers were compared to

responses from mothers of “intact” families², to identify any predictors of lowered psychological well-being among the former group. The presentation also covered the results of qualitative in-depth interviews with 54 single mothers, 34 of who were participants in Project Athena, an empowerment programme designed to help such mothers.

Dr Mathew acknowledged that single parents are a vulnerable group, undergoing multiple stressors that could be mitigated via different coping methods. Some coping methods are more effective than others, and they could be segregated into more or less adaptive methods. It is also important to note that in a family, maternal emotional well-being has a higher correlation with better child outcomes.

Results of the study were presented in three sections: resource adequacy; maternal psychological well-being; and coping among single Indian mothers.

Resource adequacy

Single mothers post-divorce generally had fewer resources compared to mothers from intact families in terms of time and finances. For example, 64% of single mothers said they had food for three meals a day most of the time, compared to 78% of mothers from intact families. Financially, 59% of single mothers did not have money for basic celebrations of festivals, compared to 37% of mothers from intact families.

Maternal psychological well-being

Results from the survey showed a high correlation between single motherhood and signs of depression. For example, 37% of single mothers claimed that they often felt powerless to do anything about their lives, compared to 25% for mothers from intact families.

From the study, single mothers tended to have more dependents, inadequate resources and social support, and often continue to suffer from the negative emotional effects of being a single parent.

The post-divorce realities were also very harsh. Single mother faced multiple difficulties involving accommodation, finances and personal well-being, including that of her children.

Coping among single Indian mothers

While these negative emotional effects affect both single mothers and mothers from intact families, the effects on single mothers were disproportionately higher. For a third of the respondents, these negative emotional effects continued to create major interference in their life at the time of study. These mothers commonly turned to religion, among other avenues, when coping with these negative emotional effects.

Lastly, a qualitative study found that intervention programmes in Project Athena were successful because it: (i) provided emotional and social support, and (ii) imparted financial, parenting and problem-solving skills, thereby boosting the self-confidence of single mothers. Nevertheless the programme, while beneficial, might see their beneficiaries cope in maladaptive ways when faced with major financial setbacks. Thus, without adequate resources, new gains are not necessarily maintained under difficult circumstances.

2. Here, “intact” families refer to two-parent families with marriage problems where couples were often not on talking terms. Note that they were from low-income families.

Presentation 4: “For the sake of the children — Child-focused resolution programme in the Family Court” by Sophia Ang (Director, Counselling and Psychological Services, Family and Juvenile Justice Division, Judiciary, State Courts)

This presentation provided a broad overview of the Family Court’s system and process.

The Child Focused Resolution Centre (CFRC) was set up in response to the amendments to Section 50 of the Women’s Charter. The amendments recognised the complexity of a divorcing family, hence the setting up of the CFRC in partnership with the MSF. It aims to create an early conciliatory forum to resolve child-related disputes and facilitate parenting agreements to preserve relationships in the child’s interests, among others.

In Singapore, divorce is a two-stage legal process, focusing on the ground for divorce followed by ancillary matters.³ However, where there are children’s issues to be resolved, the judge for the case would refer divorcing couples to CFRC at the earliest possible stage of their proceedings.

The CFRC programme starts with a conference and is followed by an assessment and counselling. The assessment phase is when parties identify underlying issues and needs of the children involved. Subsequently, the counsellors facilitate discussions regarding the couple’s relationship such as addressing underlying concerns related to children.

Are the current CFRC measures effective? While the settlement rates⁴ for divorce-related disputes stood at 75%, children’s matters achieved a remarkable 89% settlement rate. This shows that despite arguments between the couple, couples have a high chance of seeing eye-to-eye when it comes to their children.

A preliminary satisfaction survey conducted on CFRC yielded encouraging results about the CFRC programme. Nevertheless, the parties indicated a need for more information about managing children’s issues in a divorce before the start of divorce proceedings, and that it would be helpful to speak to a counsellor. This comment was raised despite resources being made available to the public. Ms Ang said it would be important to identify the reason behind this in order to address it.

Question and Answer (Q&A), moderated by Dr Rosaleen Ow (Head, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore)

The following points were raised during the Q&A:

Case management continuum — from courts to social and community services

While not all cases are referred to social workers, the courts do make referral to relevant help agencies. Ms Ang explained that during the court process if parties had already begun to receive help with an agency, subsequent referral would likely be made to the same agency, since a relationship would have been established.⁵ For non-acrimonious divorces, the parties undergo a one-time group consultation session on children and post-parenting issues. Here, the aim is to forge a relationship with the facilitator for more personalised advice and to increase the effectiveness. This process also aims to help identify problems relating to the children so that the relevant helplines can be roped in.

3. Ancillary matters refer to children, matrimonial properties and assets.

4. Settlement rate refers to cases that were settled before they reached the courts.

5. Depending on the needs, the couple may be referred to a different agency.

Post-forum note: The Family Justice Committee has recently proposed that the Family and Juvenile Court to be renamed the Family Justice Courts — a combination of the High Court, Family Court and Youth Court — in a move to minimise drawn-out tussles between estranged couples.⁶ Other interim recommendations included were: empowering the court to appoint child representatives to independently represent children; getting lawyers trained in the non-legal aspects of the family justice system; and disseminating information on available support services to persons who might come in contact with families in need.

Group counselling strategies

In forming a practical group discussion for divorcees, organisers of social welfare groups would usually group people of different backgrounds together, such as single mothers together with married mothers. However, single mothers or widows would sometimes request to be seated together instead of mixing with other mothers from non-single parent families. Dr Mathews explained that based on SINDA's experience, mothers at different stages require different approaches; single mothers at the early stages of recovery do better when mingling around similar individuals, while "normalisation" usually occurs at a later stage. Nevertheless, Dr Quah shared that there are people who decide, at an early stage, that they want to remarry and who are determined not to stay amongst the circle of single parents. In Dr Quah's view, those of this perspective are therefore less likely to find group counselling with other single parents useful.

Grandparents as part of the support system — help the village help the divorced parents

Single mothers often face problems of resource inadequacy and in Singapore, they often move back to stay with their ageing parents. Thus, it was suggested that some support, in the form of imparting the know-how, could be given to grandparents to equip them with the skills required to handle such events. Ms Ang added that grandparents in the family are well positioned to prevent and mitigate the effects of "tribal war" between their parents' families.

Counselling for civil divorces

All Muslim divorces have to go through a mandatory counselling session at the start of the divorce process. Of all the cases filed, 40% of the couples do not continue with the divorce process after counselling. This sparked the question — should counselling be made mandatory for civil divorces as well?

Ms Rahayu suggested that mandatory counselling for civil divorces could be considered, although she highlighted the religious element within Muslim divorce counselling. Compared to the Syariah Court cases, civil divorces involve a more diverse group and thus a more secular approach may have to be taken. Important questions on the matrimonial home and children issues should be discussed during the counselling session.

Counselling for the children of divorced parents

The Q&A session also discussed counselling for older children of divorced parents, since the focus on children was mainly on those 14 years and below. While there is currently the HELP Family Service Centre, which runs the Rainbow programme to assist children from disadvantage families, there is a lack of support for older children. Ms Rahayu said that the effects of parental separation on children depended on their age; children who are old enough to witness the process might be affected more compared to those under two years old. These older children have a higher risk of having relationship problems compared to

6. Amir Hussain, "Body of courts specifically for family-related issues proposed", *Today*, 8 May 2014.

those from two-parent families. A participant also suggested that the Ministry of Education should encourage schools to take up the Rainbow programme, citing the decline in the number of participating schools.

Children in divorced family — educational impact

One participant also suggested that a study could be done to study the proportion of children in the cohort with divorced parents, and to analyse the results based on schools, e.g., between neighbourhood school and “branded” schools.

* * * * *