

Sixth Family Research Network (FRN) Forum, 23 May 2011: “Singlehood in Singapore: Issues and Challenges”

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Singlehood is an important contributor to the very low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in societies like Singapore and Japan where childbearing is acceptable only within the context of marriage. The forum examined singlehood, its implications as well as possible ways to increase marriage rates in Singapore. About 150 participants from academia, government, private and people sectors attended it.

In their study on Singaporean singles of Chinese descent, Professor Gavin Jones and Dr Zhang Yanxia, of the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS), found that the rather high singlehood rate among this group might be attributed to increasing individualism and changing attitudes towards marriage. Based on their interview data, they found evidence that values such as “freedom, independence and self-actualisation” were prioritised as higher than marriage and family by their

respondents. Further, respondents viewed marriage more as a personal choice than a “social and familial duty”. Their respondents also pointed to rising costs of living, long working hours and increasing examples of failed marriages within their social circles as further reasons to consider delaying marriage or not marrying at all.

In comparison, Assistant Professor Mika Toyota, Department of Sociology, NUS, argued that it is not increasing individualism but the acceptance of the traditional view of marriage and family that is holding Japanese singles back, especially the women, from committing to marriage. While research on singlehood in Japan has alluded to the rising educational attainment of women for the rising singlehood rates, Dr Toyota noted that it was a more “nuanced picture” than commonly portrayed.



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Not having found a suitable partner is a common reason given by singles for not getting married. What are singles looking for in a potential life partner? Associate Professor Norman Li, Singapore Management University, an internationally recognised scholar on human mating, noted that modern mate selection at its core continues to be guided by our “evolutionary heritage”. Thus, women look for men who are taller than them because in earlier times it was an indicator of their ability to protect them in harsh environments. Similarly, a man’s inclination and preference for a good-looking girl as a mate can be explained by evolutionary psychology, where physical beauty is associated with fertility. Associate Professor Li also noted that societies that valued economic success were incompatible with marriage or family formation. Research evidence found that people in these societies “placed less value on close relationships, had more conflict with friends and romantic partners and less satisfaction with family life”.

The presentations and subsequent discussion raised several issues including whether a modern and fast-paced society like Singapore was conducive for marriage. The high prevalence of singles in the age cohort 30 to 34 based on current Census numbers appears to suggest that it is not.



This is the group who is economically active and in the midst of establishing a foothold in their work life. No doubt, their evolutionary compass would guide them to their mates but eventually they would have to make the tough choice of either marriage or career development. The figures suggest that many have opted to delay marriage for the latter.

In my view, taking into account the issues raised during the forum, maybe the solution to curtailing the increasing singlehood numbers in countries like Singapore and Japan is not just about having in place policy measures to get singles to meet or making the environment conducive for marriage; but, convincing individuals that it is acceptable to approach life at a slower pace and hopefully with time singles may just say to themselves, “Hey, maybe there is more to life than just work ...”

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