

## Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth Youth & Family

By Samantha Quek

### Background

The Singapore Perspectives conference positions itself as a platform to engage thinking Singaporeans on the country's policy challenges. The theme of this year's conference is "Youth". Over the course of two days, the conference unpacked some challenges arising from changing norms in Singapore, such as shifting timelines and attitudes towards marriage and parenthood, while also discussing some predictive factors behind these changes as well as potential solutions.

This panel, titled "Youth & Family", featured Mr Darius Cheung, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer at 99.co; Dr Shannon Ang, Assistant Professor of College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University; and Mr Yuwan Mohan, Council Member of Families for Life and National Youth Council. The session was facilitated and moderated by Dr Tan Poh Lin, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

In the pre-panel video on family, Singapore residents representing different family structures, relationships and caregiving arrangements were shown, expressing their views on what a "successful family" means to them. Video respondents discuss policies to better support their caregiving and family arrangements. They also discuss some of the challenges and prejudices they encounter, while acknowledging some of the positive changes that have happened.

### Soaring property prices impedes dating among youths

Mr Darius Cheung spoke about the increased cost of living — in particular, the cost of property and rental prices, and how this could impede the dating scene of youths.

Mr Cheung shared that people used to think of dating and co-habiting as two separate things, while the youths today find the need to experience co-habitation prior to deciding on marriage. Citing a rise in rental costs over the last 10 years, youths may find it difficult to obtain a personal space for dating.

### Increasing Cost of Living Impedes Childbearing Among Youths

Drawing statistics from theAsianparent, a parenting app, 80 per cent of the parents stated that having two children is ideal. This ideal is juxtaposed with the reality of families stopping at having just one child. Thus, the poll followed up with the question, “What would make you have another kid?”

In the order of priority, respondents listed the following factors: longer maternity leave; free education; subsidy to engage domestic help; removing COE for cars; and in lowest priority, longer paternity leave.

Highlighting that financial concerns were not the only consideration, Mr Cheung suggested that other factors such as opportunity costs and time constraints were at play. In addition, he brought up the notion of relative scarcity. Despite Singapore being a high-income economy, prospective parents may feel pressured to provide the best resources for their children, instead of merely the necessities, he said.

### **What is Really Stopping Youths from Starting a Family?**

The second panellist, Dr Shannon Ang, said we need to pay more attention to what youths really mean when they raise issues. For example, when they say that having children is expensive and stressful, they seem to be referring to opportunity costs instead of purely monetary costs.

Another example is when youths say that parenting is too great a responsibility and that they are unprepared for it. The underlying meaning behind this statement could be that they did not like the environment they were raised in and do not want to inflict that on their future child.

### **Youths Today Face Challenges That Are More Profound**

Dr Ang added that being a youth today is no longer the same as being a youth in the past. Youths today face the challenge of having to support an ageing population and greater difficulty to supersede their parents' levels of success.

On the second challenge, youths today exist in a society with widening inequality gaps. According to the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG LEADS), inequality begins as early as preschool, where the wealthier and better educated parents have children with better skills. In the same vein, he analysed data from the Youth STEPS study, and noticed the bifurcation of networks that better educated parents offer to their child.

### **Society Can Help Youths Overcome the Challenges**

Dr Ang proposed three things that society can do to help youths overcome the challenges of having to support an ageing population and widening inequality gaps.

First, to expand the definition of what constitutes “family” so that the burdens of an ageing population do not fall on youths alone, but are shared by different stakeholders (i.e., a trusted friend of the older family member). To illustrate this point, a case in South Korea saw an older person adopting her best friend so they could help each other sign medical forms.

Second, to reduce the reward of precocity so that the early beginnings of one’s life holds lower stakes and allows for more room to make mistakes. What alludes from rewarding precocity is the unhealthy valorisation of being young or reaching milestones very early, as seen in, for instance, the management associate programmes that fast-track career progressions. This brings the youths to a crossroads where they face a difficult decision to make — to prioritise family building or career building?

Third, despite the pro-family stance that Singapore promotes, it seems that current policies and frameworks are not explicit about the trade-offs between prioritising either economy and family. We have to resolve the tension between economy and family because both work and family are endless vortexes — they will take up all the time you have, and when you are climbing the corporate ladder one tends to take priority at the expense of the other.

### **A Change in Social Mindset Needed**

Mr Yuvan Mohan elaborated on an additional phenomenon that requires a social mindset change: the need to shift from a sequential approach in life to a portfolio approach. Similar to Dr Ang’s second point on the idea of shifting away from rewarding precocity, both culminate towards an unspoken structured pathway already expected of youths to undertake: education, then work, then relationship. Because of the linear and sequential journey that youths feel the need to follow in life, it has inevitably shaped their perception of relationships, which is something that they pursue after gaining success in their careers.

### **Support System for Youths as They Support Others**

Given that families are smaller now, youths bear a greater caretaker load when it comes to their ageing parents. Mr Yuvan proposed two changes.

The first is an infrastructural change, to regionalise the learning nodes in Singapore. Over the years, where we play has become a lot more accessible. For instance, the eastern part of Singapore has grown from having few to many malls and facilities, with newer additions being Tampines 1, Our Tampines Hub and more. Work nodes in Singapore is also relatively regionalised, as Mr Yuvan shared his personal experience having worked in multiple locations, e.g., Asia Square, Changi Business Park, Ubi Tech Park and Toa Payoh. However, the learning nodes in Singapore have yet attained as much regionalisation. Certain kinds of schools are typically concentrated within certain districts, thus amounting to younger parents relocating their homes because of their child’s school. All in all, greater regionalisation of learning nodes will be helpful for parents, whereby in a fast-paced society, the saving of 10 minutes on travel distance, might equate to an additional one hour of breathing space for them.

The second proposed change is to elevate the value of caregiving of the elderly to that of caring for children, which would include mandatory leave for eldercare, non-means tested incentives for care, as well as regarding institutionalised care as a valid option.

### Question-and-Answer Session

**Q:** How can we rethink the definition of family in Singapore? How can we be more inclusive and equitable in our policies?

**A:** Mr Yuvan said that the rethinking the definition of family should start from young. This means allowing younger people to explore what it means to be in a relationship. Dr Ang suggested that inclusivity would mean to expand and explore more help options, making it easier for non-family members to help one another. Often, the unspoken rule that a certain form of help can come only for family members, makes it hard for non-traditional families to receive help. Mr Cheung offered an entrepreneurial perspective on priorities and interpreted the question as rethinking about the definition of family success in Singapore — that if the priority of Singapore is to welcome all people to thrive, then inclusivity would mean that individuals have the freedom to change what family success means to them.

**Q:** How can we assure that parents can spend time and raise their children with human interaction, rather than through online devices before their schooling years?

**A:** Mr Cheung talked about the importance of educating parents about the damage that these devices do to their children and encouraged them to set up play dates for their children. Mr Yuvan introduced the idea of community of care, to engage in intergenerational conversations so that younger parents can learn from older couples how they manage their children's screen times. Dr Ang cautioned against moral panic towards this issue, citing a quote in 1909 that reflected moral panic over the advent of newspaper, and the fact that every generation would face moral panic over a new phenomenon.

**Q:** How have gender roles evolved within a family unit? What can be done to address and understand the evolving gender roles?

**A:** Mr Cheung shared that the Asianparent poll revealed younger parents' desire for both longer maternity and paternity leave. This shows that youths see parenting as a two-parent job. Dr Ang shed light on the "second shift", i.e., that women now go out to work, but remain in-charge of household and childcare duties post-work. For this, he suggested the need to renegotiate and come to an establishment of new norms for gender roles. Mr Yuvan proposed both infrastructural and social support for the change in gender roles. Shared in his presentation earlier, the regionalisation within Singapore is key to reduce travel time for parents, since both now take on more shared responsibility regarding financial and childrearing. For social support, this would be community of care — having intergenerational conversations to understand how older couples come to an alignment regarding gender role delegation.

**Q:** Given that housing is a scarce good in Singapore, is there an impetus to allocate this to only a certain group (e.g., heterosexual couples) while excluding others (e.g., same-sex couples)?

**A:** Mr Cheung shared that ultimately, it returns to the point on priority. If the priority of Singapore is to encourage parenthood, then the way that Singapore allocates housing should follow suit — To give families that have the highest likelihood of producing a child, no matter the family type.

**Q:** Should our public housing system be so closely tied to marital status. How can we improve the flexibility for unmarried Singaporean youths?

**A:** Like Mr Cheung's stance for the previous question, Dr Ang rehashed the point on priority. Rather than having policies to fit our idea of what a family should look like, perhaps it is to allow for the priority of society to shape policy. Mr Yuvan highlighted the need for a mindset shift, beyond policy; rather than having marriage signify the next step in life, i.e., to move out, he proposed the possibility of co-living with in-laws. Ultimately, this intersection between housing and family does not need to be systematic or cookie-cutter, he said.

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