

## 10 ways to have more babies

**Melissa Pang, Andrea Ong, Fiona Low, Poon Chian Hui, Irene Tham, Melissa Lin and Goh Kai Shi**

**The Straits Times**, 20 January 2011

More babies please. For years, the Government has launched measures to get Singaporeans to do so, given the plunging birth rate. Despite this, the total fertility rate fell to a historic low of 1.16 last year. Is it time to consider more radical ideas? We offer 10 for discussion.

### 1 Adopt babies

More than half of the children adopted here each year come from abroad.

So, in theory, a rise in the adoption rate would increase the number of babies in Singapore.

More than 91 per cent of the public views adoption as a perfectly viable way of starting a family, according to a study last year funded by the National University of Singapore (NUS).

However, the number of couples seeking to do so has been dropping in recent years.

There was an average of 427 adoptions a year from 2006 to 2009, down from 700 a year between 2000 and 2003.

Some adoption agencies have attributed the drop to stricter checks on prospective parents, introduced in 2005 in the form of home study reports.

These reports contain an extensive list of questions on topics ranging from the applicants' dating history to their financial status.

The director of an adoption agency, who declined to be named, said such stringent checks could hamper the efforts of people to adopt.

'Many are discouraged by the long waiting time. Relaxing the adoption laws would certainly attract more people to the option,' said the director, who has 11 years of experience in the industry.

Readers have written to The Straits Times Forum page expressing similar opinions.

Reader Fu Hou Da, who wrote in after a 2007 report showed a decline in adoption numbers, said: 'While most will agree that some checks on prospective adoptive parents are necessary, there is no reason why the agencies accredited to conduct the checks have to go into nitty-gritty issues like dating history and what child-rearing books one is reading.'

But Associate Professor Paulin Straughan from NUS' sociology department said: 'The state has a moral responsibility to protect the welfare of the child and an obligation to screen applicants to ensure that they are well-suited.'

The Nominated MP said relaxing adoption laws is unlikely to increase the population by a significant amount.

'Adoption is an option for only a small group of people who cannot have their own children. Therefore, relaxing the adoption laws would have a minimal impact on our replacement rate.'

## **2 Cut abortion rate**

Reducing the number of abortions could be one way of boosting Singapore's declining fertility rate, say experts.

However, the decision on whether to end a pregnancy should ultimately be left to the mother, and the state should not be overly involved.

The number of abortions in Singapore is rising every year. There were 12,318 involving those aged 15 to 49 in 2009, 325 more than in 2007, the latest statistics from the Health Ministry show.

The proportion of abortions involving teenagers has gone down - from 11.4 per cent in 2007 to 9.7 per cent in 2009.

Still, government intervention in this area could help improve the fertility rate. For example, it could channel more funds into shelters for unwed pregnant young women or girls to encourage them to keep the babies, who can be put up for adoption later.

Many of the shelters - some providing counselling and fostering services - have been effective in counselling teen mums.

A counsellor for Project Cherub by the Tanjong Pagar Family Service Centre, which supports women with unwanted pregnancies, said that it facilitates between five and 10 adoptions each year.

Dr Yap Mui Teng, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, thinks that more government funding and involvement may help lower the abortion rate.

But the choice should still be left entirely to the mother, she added. 'Some may not want to go through with the pregnancy due to fear of stigmatisation or relationship issues,' she said. 'They should not be influenced to keep the baby.'

Such influence imposed on a pregnant teenager may produce the desired result - a boost to the national birth rate. But it will not be fair to the girl, said Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society.

'The girl is in a crisis. She can't think straight. She will most likely follow the advice of a sound adult,' she said.

Ms Denise Phua, president of the Autism Resource Centre and an MP for Jalan Besar GRC, agrees that keeping the baby should be the choice of the mother: 'The state should not be overly involved.'

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports did not reply to queries by press time.

## **3 Allow surrogate pregnancies**

There are no laws in Singapore that explicitly prohibit surrogacy here. But under Ministry of Health (MOH) guidelines, all health care institutions providing assisted reproduction services are not allowed to carry out surrogate arrangements.

A surrogate pregnancy is when a woman agrees to give birth to a child for another woman.

A solution for infertile couples is to seek help in places such as India, where its legalised rent-a-womb industry is estimated to be worth more than US\$500 million (S\$640 million) each year.

In 2008, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan asked if surrogacy should be allowed in Singapore.

'Critics were upset, calling it an exploitation of the poor by the rich through renting a womb,' he had said. 'Supporters, on the other hand, see this as a mere provision of a service, a normal commercial transaction that results in a win-win outcome for both parties.'

The comment sparked a debate in newspaper forums. One reader said it would give women who cannot give birth, or career women climbing the corporate ladder, a chance to fulfil their maternal needs. Another described it as 'mercenary motherhood'.

There are two methods of surrogacy. In the first, a couple produces the egg and sperm, and the fertilised egg is placed in the womb of the surrogate mother.

The other method involves combining the sperm of the man with the surrogate mother's own egg, resulting in a child biologically related to the surrogate.

An MOH spokesman described surrogacy as 'not just a medical issue but a very complex matter with social, legal, religious and economic considerations'.

In the United States, 'the legal position alone is highly diverse among its various jurisdictions, ranging from laws that recognise surrogacy, to the non-enforceability of surrogacy contracts, to criminalisation of paid surrogacy', added the spokesman.

Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob agreed: 'Surrogacy is a huge step to take and the question is whether Singaporeans are ready. We cannot allow surrogacy because there is still strong resistance and discomfort to the idea.'

#### **4 Tie Citizenship and PR to Babies**

Technical specialist Praveen George, 27, moved here from Kerala, India, in 2001.

He is a permanent resident and single. To him, Singapore's fast pace and high quality of life make it a good place for building his career but not for settling down.

'The cost of living is very high and I wouldn't want to get married and have kids here,' he said.

Such a sentiment may explain why the latest census found that even though the share of PRs who are married is higher than for citizens, PRs have fewer children than citizens.

Three in four PRs are married, compared to just over half of citizens, partly because most PRs fall in the marriageable age bracket of 25 to 44.

But while 38.7 per cent of citizens have over two children, only 14.8 per cent of PRs do so. Among female PRs who have been married, one in five have no children, whereas only one in 10 of this group of female citizens is childless.

So what if Singapore were to tie the granting of permanent residency passes to child bearing? Would that be more help or hindrance?

The idea got the thumbs-down from experts and single PRs interviewed.

Nominated MP Paulin Straughan, a family sociologist, said Singapore tends to attract highly qualified and skilled PRs, and the worldwide trend is for such professionals to have fewer children.

'They are brought in as individuals to contribute to the labour force, not to have babies,' she said.

Also, the link between PRs' low birth numbers and Singapore's total fertility rate may not be that strong since PRs account for only 14.3 per cent of the resident population. And as long as they remain PRs, it is uncertain whether they will stay on or move elsewhere, said Dr Straughan.

'They are long-term guests at best. We should be investing in the citizen group,' she added.

Such a policy may have unintended consequences. Institute of Policy Studies demographer Yap Mui Teng said: 'One concern of societies where immigrants have more children than the local population is the change in the makeup of the population over time.'

That is particularly so if the immigrants come from backgrounds different from the local population, she added.

Some single PRs like marketing associate Annabelle Low, 23, who has lived here for 10 years, is against the idea because it infringes on personal choice.

'It's like outsourcing making babies,' said Ms Low, a Malaysian who is a Singapore PR.

'You can't force people to have babies. It's more important that PRs feel a sense of belonging to Singapore,' she added.

Company secretary Goh S.K., 35, another Malaysian who is a PR here, said: 'There are many single PRs in Singapore, all working and contributing to the economy. It's not fair to say we're not contributing by not having babies.'

Mr George said such a policy might cause single PRs like him to leave Singapore. Singapore's low fertility could also be due to its cultural mentality, he said.

'In India, there's social stigma if you don't marry and have kids. In Singapore, career comes before family,' he said.

## **5 Promote IVF**

Could giving couples more incentives to have in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment be an answer to Singapore's declining birth rate?

Some MPs certainly think so. In March last year, Mr Seah Kian Peng of Marine Parade GRC and Mr Chiam See Tong of Potong Pasir suggested just that.

Mr Seah stands by his recommendation. He said it would 'give those who really want to have children the financial means to do so'.

Fertility centres in public hospitals recorded a surge of up to 50 per cent in patient numbers in the year after the Government introduced subsidies of up to \$3,000 for Singaporeans and permanent residents for up to three IVF cycles.

In 2009, 3,271 patients had assisted reproduction (AR) treatment, resulting in 778 births.

In 2007, before the subsidy was introduced, 631 babies were born through AR from 2,179 patients. The Ministry of Health figures include all forms of AR including IVF.

In private hospitals, IVF costs between \$8,000 and \$15,000 a cycle. At public hospitals, it is about \$7,000 to \$10,000.

A couple can use Medisave for their first three IVF attempts: \$6,000 for the first cycle, and \$5,000 and \$4,000 subsequently.

The Government has given \$5.3 million to the assisted reproductive technology treatment co-funding scheme from August 2008 until December 2009.

But Dr Lam Pin Min, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health, is sceptical about whether increasing the funding would significantly raise the number of babies born in Singapore. This is because the low birth rate is not down to fertility problems, he felt.

Dr Jothi Kumar, a fertility expert in private practice, agreed that promoting IVF treatment would not raise fertility rates.

'Many women may be delaying having babies because of the misconception that they can turn to assisted reproductive techniques like IVF as a final resort. The underlying problem, however, is that couples are getting married at a later age.'

## **6 Don't discourage single mums**

To be an unmarried mother requires both resourcefulness and resources - more so in Singapore, where unwed mothers are excluded from most baby benefits.

While parents get between \$4,000 and \$6,000 under the Baby Bonus scheme when a child is born, mothers who are not wed to the child's father get nothing.

They are also left out of the Children Development Account (CDA) programme, under which the Government matches, dollar for dollar, the amount saved in the child's CDA.

Also, only married couples are allowed to participate in artificial reproduction methods, such as in-vitro insemination, here.

Professor Jean Yeung of the National University of Singapore's sociology department attributes the legislation to a culture where a two-parent family is the norm.

'There may be a few women starting to consider having a child alone, but they are not a significant proportion of the population. Most of the community probably would still not accept the idea,' she said.

In addition, unwed mothers may not be eligible for the full range of workplace benefits.

The Manpower Ministry's website states that an employee is entitled to 16 weeks' maternity leave only if the child's parents are married, under the Children Development Co-Savings

Act. Single employees covered under the Employment Act are entitled to only 12 weeks' maternity leave.

Nevertheless, there have been indicators of more singles wanting children. A report in 2006 quoted five adoption agencies here as saying that they have seen a rise in singles looking to adopt.

Human resources expert David Leong feels the current disadvantages single mums face may wane over time: 'As society changes, new social patterns and norms are forming. HR departments may want to take a reviewed perspective to cater to...workers with different requirements.'

But Prof Yeung cautioned that 'most research shows that child development fares better in a two-parent family'.

### **7 Have four months of paternity leave**

If fathers were given four months off work to look after new additions to the family, would it induce couples to have more children?

Yes, say sociologists and demographers, in the sense that legislating paternity leave will send the message that parenting is as much a man's role as it is his wife's.

But they are divided on how effective this carrot would be.

While mothers here take four months of paid maternity leave, the Government has not legislated paternity leave.

But nearly half of the 3,410 employers surveyed by the Manpower Ministry last year were found to have voluntarily offered their male employees paternity leave - even if it is usually no more than two to three days.

Sociologist Jean Yeung from the Asia Research Institute said the disparity in maternity and paternity leave periods reinforces patriarchal family values: 'It sends the wrong policy message that childcare is the woman's responsibility, and that men are too busy to take time off from work for the family.'

The result: Women are left to bear the greater opportunity cost of having a baby, which could turn off those afraid of losing their jobs or being passed over for promotions.

**Dr Yap Mui Teng from the Institute of Policy Studies made the same point but added that legislating paternity leave is not a magic bullet that will solve the fertility problem.**

For one thing, said Mr Lim Soon Hock, the chairman of the National Family Council (NFC) and the Centre for Fathering, employers here may not be ready to do without their employees while they take an extended daddy's time-out from work.

And secondly, he added, the liberal paternity-leave policies practiced in Sweden, for example, come with the side effect of high taxes, which Singaporeans may not be ready to absorb.

When the Government raised a new mum's maternity leave from three months to four in 2008, the NFC suggested making one month gender-neutral so fathers can be with their children more.

This idea was not taken up.

Employers' support and the spectre of higher taxes aside, there is still room for Singapore to adapt the Scandinavian model of setting aside a part of the couple's joint parental leave for the father, but to make it such that if he does not take the leave, he forfeits it, said Dr Yeung.

This 'use-it-or-lose-it' approach will gradually change people's mindset about gender roles and behaviour, she said.

## **8 Scare couples into having kids**

Shock campaigns have been known to work.

The Italian advertisement showing the nude, emaciated French model Isabelle Caro went some way to putting a face to the eating disorder anorexia.

Closer to home, Singapore has slapped graphic images of cancerous lungs on cigarette packs to deter people from smoking.

It is thus not a stretch to apply scare tactics to get childless couples to have children by, for example, showing an old bedridden couple with no one to care for them.

Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng, who is a managing director at public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, said such a campaign could work on some people: 'Different people connect to different messages, so it's worthwhile to try a variety of methods to promote having children.'

But he also said that having children did not guarantee being cared for in old age, since children might abandon their parents.

Other advertising and marketing experts were less optimistic that shock tactics would work.

Ms Audrey McGagh, who heads communications agency McGagh Communications, said: 'Such a campaign has the potential to backfire if not executed properly. People may laugh at it and the message will be lost.'

As for MP Charles Chong, he pointed out that people have Central Provident Fund savings for their retirement years.

Retiree Joon Tay, 62, who has a sickly son aged 31, said she dismissed his suggestion that she adopt a child so she and her husband would have someone to look after them in the coming years.

'If you have the money, you can get nursing homes to take care of you,' she said.

## **9 Promote early marriage**

National statistics suggest that people who marry when they are older have children later - and have fewer of them.

In 2009, Singaporean women got married for the first time at the median age of 27.4 years, up from 25.9 years a decade ago. As a result, they had their first child at the median age of 29.6 years, compared with 28.6 years in 1999.

Families got smaller too - the average number of children born to women between 30 and 39 fell from 1.78 in 1999 to 1.57 in 2009.

Affirming the trend, Professor Gavin Jones of the National University of Singapore's sociology department traced it to older women being more likely to have problems conceiving, or bringing a pregnancy to term.

But Singapore is already trying to promote early marriage through agencies like the Social Development Network, he added.

Are there other methods to promote this message to get married early and have children quickly?

Mr James Keng Lim, executive creative director at advertising agency Nerf Creative, thinks an ad campaign could work. He suggests painting the picture of an ageing couple who cannot keep up with their active young children.

Nominated MP Paulin Straughan pointed out that a reason people marry later is their inability to meet someone suitable. She suggested companies hold regular 'social nights' to help people meet potential spouses.

The Government can also help by offering more affordable childcare services, she added.

But Associate Professor Christie Scollon, who teaches psychology at the Singapore Management University, said: 'If people (believe) a certain set of requirements must be met before one can marry, then no amount of subsidy can get people to marry earlier.'

A study published last July comparing marriage attitudes in Singapore and the United States found that Singaporean women desire marriage and children less than their US counterparts - and have higher expectations of their marriage partners.

'People's attitudes need to change, and throwing more money at them isn't the way to do it,' Prof Scollon said.

But Mr Neo Hwee Yeong, 24, feels subsidies could be the answer. The construction site supervisor got married at 19 and has a four-year-old son. 'I am already worrying if I am able to send my son to university, and if he can't get into a local one, do I have money to send him overseas?'

### **10 Free childcare up to age three**

Providing free childcare up to age three could stop falling birth rates, and it is not a new idea.

In 2008, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew hinted that Singapore may go the Swedish way and, among other measures, provide free childcare.

At the Nomura Asia Equity Forum, he had said: 'The Swedes have completely changed their system. Support paternity leave, women get their children into creches, into nursery schools, all paid by the state. Very heavy expenses but Sweden can afford it.'

'We are looking at our budget, can we afford it? But we've got to go as these are proven ways.'

According to the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports website, childcare fees vary. Full-day care can cost from \$300 to \$2,600 a month.



'If childcare is not free, then it should at least be heavily subsidised,' said Mr Charles Chong, MP for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

It is also important to have conveniently-located high-quality childcare to let working women have kids and still pursue careers.

Sales executive Loo Sook Yong, 34, who has two sons, said the incentives will spur her to have more children. 'Monetary incentives will definitely help boost the fertility rate. I had another child because I could afford it.'

But more factors need to be considered, said Madam Halimah Yacob, MP for Jurong GRC, for free childcare will subsidise even those who are not in need of it.

Economist Chia Ngee Hoon said measures are also needed to reduce the implicit costs of having kids - what people sacrifice.

### **Young enough to try again**

Mrs June Lim got married at the age of 25 and had her first child, Cheralynn, at 26. Because she was still young, she decided to try for another child.

Sixteen months ago, she gave birth to a girl named Natalie.

Now 33, the account executive looked back at her decision and said: 'Then, it was okay for me to have another child as being young was one of my criteria for having children.' She also had more energy to look after them, she added.

Her husband, Mr Andy Lim, 37, is a technical officer.

Mrs Lim said having children was always part of her plan.

'I think it's a natural thing to want to have kids and be complete as a woman. So in my opinion, giving birth completes me,' she said.

### **Childless and lonely in a home**

Madam Foo Sai Mui, 79, now spends her days at the Bright Hill Evergreen Home and gets by on social welfare.

She does not know where her husband is, and has no children so she hardly gets visitors. She has a brother but he is sickly.

She used to live with a sister. However, when she had three falls in September 2007 and fractured her back, she needed a full-time caregiver, which was beyond what her sister could provide.

This was how Madam Foo came to be in a home.

Her sister has since died.

Feeling the ache of loneliness, she now wishes she had children.

'Who wouldn't want to have someone who can take care of them in their old age?' she asked in Cantonese.

'It's a little lonely, but at least I'm well-taken cared of here,' added the wheelchair-bound woman.

'I dare not ask for anything else. I lead a simple life,' she said.

### **What some countries are doing to boost fertility rates**

**FRANCE** (total fertility rate: 1.97): Weeks after giving birth, French women are offered a state-paid course to help them start having sex again as soon as possible. Other freebies include a personal trainer and computer games that help them exercise.

This is in addition to other perks such as free nursery schools, tax deductions for each child, generous family allowances and paid, four-month maternity leave.

**SWEDEN** (TFR: 1.67): In 1974, Sweden became the first country to replace maternity leave with parental leave, which covers maternity, paternity and adoption leave. Two months of the 16-month parental leave per child is exclusively for fathers.

**BRITAIN** (TFR: 1.92): All female employees are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity or adoption leave, of which 39 weeks are paid. The husband, or partner in the case of same-sex relationships, may request a two-week paternity leave paid at a fixed rate of £124.88 (\$255) a week or 90 per cent of the spouse's average weekly earnings, whichever is less.

**LITHUANIA** (TFR: 1.24): Mothers get eight weeks of paid leave before the due date. They get paid maternity leave for the first year, 85 per cent paid leave in the second year, and one year of unpaid leave after that. Either the mother or the father can take the leave, or they can take it in shifts.

**ICELAND** (TFR: 1.90): Of the nine months' parental leave given to parents, three months are reserved for the father and three months for the mother. The remaining three months can be shared between both parents.

**GERMANY** (TFR: 1.42): A variation of Sweden's model, where two out of 14 months of paid maternity leave are for fathers.

**AUSTRALIA** (TFR: 1.78): Both parents are entitled to share 18 weeks of paid parental leave, and share an extension of 52 weeks of unpaid leave.