

7 in 10 young Singaporeans feel it is not necessary to marry, but most still want to: Poll

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SINGAPORE - Young people are less likely to think it is necessary to marry and have children, but most still aspire to do so, a new survey has found.

They are held back by practical concerns such as wanting to first advance their careers and build a comfortable life, as well as the cost and stress of raising children.

These are among the findings of the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) pre-conference poll shared at the Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 29.

The survey was done to get a sense of Singaporeans' attitudes and views towards issues like family, well-being, work and other areas. Held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, the conference saw 1,200 attendees.

It found that the young are reporting higher levels of loneliness, and cost of living is top of the list of social issues that Singaporeans are most concerned about.

A representative sample of 2,356 Singapore residents were polled between November and December 2023 in three age groups: 21 to 34, 35 to 49, and 50 to 64.

While 70 per cent of the youngest group think it is not necessary to get married, 58 per cent of the middle group and 50 per cent of the oldest group feel the same.

And 72 per cent of the youngest group feel it is not necessary to have children in a marriage, compared with 63 per cent in the middle group and 49 per cent in the oldest group.

Despite this, 68 per cent of the youngest unmarried respondents foresee themselves getting married, and 67 per cent of the youngest respondents without children hope to have kids.

Across all age groups, the top two reasons for not dating or getting married are that they have not met the right person yet, and that they prefer to remain single.

Younger respondents are more likely to cite having other priorities, such as their job and self-discovery, and a lack of time and energy, as their reasons for not dating, and being deterred from getting married by the cost of doing so.

Older respondents are more likely to cite a preference to remain single as their reason for not dating or getting married.

High cost and stress emerged as the top reasons for not wanting to have children across all age groups.

“(Young people) almost have checkboxes these days before they can consider marriage and parenthood. They want to check off their job, they want the ability to have their own home and a comfortable life, being able to travel twice or three times a year,” said Dr Chew Han Ei, adjunct senior research fellow at IPS.

The poll also found a gender disparity, where women aged 21 to 49 are more likely than men in the same age group to agree that it is not necessary to get married. Women aged 21 to 34 are also more likely to agree that it is not necessary to have children.

IPS senior research fellow Kalpana Vignehsa, who conducted the poll, said: “One reason for their disinterest or reluctance that (young women) have shared with me relates to feeling worried that they will be caught in the double bind of not having equal partnership in terms of running the family.

“They talk about watching mothers burn out from being primarily responsible for the visible and invisible labour of running a family on top of full-time employment, and they aren’t convinced that their male counterparts are ready to be equal partners at home. They have opened themselves more and more to the idea they could find meaning in alternative paths instead.”

Dr Chew said the young worry about the cost of housing, the middle group about the cost of their children’s education, and the oldest group about the cost of necessities like food and healthcare.

Younger respondents are more likely to report higher levels of social isolation. More than half of them find it easier to talk to people online and feel anxious if they have to interact with others in person. Only three in 10 of those aged 50 to 64 feel the same way.

Younger respondents are more likely to hope to see greater mental health support in schools and workplaces. Mental health support ranks third on the list of social issues that younger people care about, while this concern is at eighth place for the oldest group, which aligns with how this group has a stronger stigma against mental health, said Dr Chew.

“(Younger people) are at the life stage where they should be making transitions to the workplace, transitions to higher education, and they missed out on a lot of these opportunities during the pandemic. They didn’t go for orientations, they didn’t go for their immersion programmes overseas. And there were no water cooler conversations at the workplace,” he said.

On concerns around work, younger respondents surveyed are more worried about their job prospects, such as getting their desired salary, position, benefits and working conditions.

Given the opportunity, 55 per cent of young respondents would move overseas to work, compared with 45 per cent of the middle group and 33 per cent of the oldest group.

The young feel more prepared for tech disruptions at the workplace, with 53 per cent feeling prepared for the eventual adoption of tech such as generative artificial intelligence, Web3 and blockchain in the workplace, compared with 48 per cent in the middle group and 46 per cent in the oldest group.

Younger respondents polled tend to be more civically engaged, compared with their older counterparts. The younger group participate in such activities both online and offline, and feel more empowered to create change.

IPS research fellow Wong Chin Yi, who conducted the study with Dr Kalpana, said it was encouraging to see young people involved in civic engagement.

“The age range of 21 to 34 is past the age range where we have more mandatory forms of civic engagement in schools. But this suggests to us that even if we’re past that age, youth continue to be civically engaged.”