

Family duties hinder many seniors: Survey

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Fulfilling responsibilities a main barrier to their pursuing interests

With three grandchildren aged four to 11 to care for, retiree Cheam Liew Tin admits that this sometimes makes it difficult for her to pursue her interests.

"My friends can travel as and when they want and need not worry much about clashing schedules," said the 68-year-old.

"But family comes first, and I've still managed to find time to volunteer and be involved in grassroots activities."

Like her, fulfilling family responsibilities - besides factors such as age - seems to be a main barrier for seniors in doing what they want.

Nearly 40 per cent of those polled said they were sometimes or often hindered by family duties, according to a survey of more than 2,000 Singapore residents aged 50 to 74.

This is compared with about 36 per cent and 45 per cent of them saying they were held back because of age or shortage of money, respectively.

The Council for Third Age commissioned the survey, which was conducted between October last year and January this year. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released a report on the findings on Wednesday.

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, who wrote the report with National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan, told The Straits Times: "Just ensuring that you have to have the house cleaned and provide homecooked meals is enough of a family responsibility to prevent some people from pursuing a hobby."

As for caregiving duties, the survey found that only about half of those polled were likely to care for an ageing spouse, parent, relative or a grandchild in the future.

This is despite the fact that most respondents' social networks are based on family ties.

The researchers warned that changing norms may lead to weaker family ties. "As more singles and childless couples (get older), we need to debunk the traditional expectation that the needs of the elderly can be taken care of by the family," they wrote, calling for more community social support.

But the survey found that the community involvement of seniors was limited. Less than 10 per cent of them took part in grassroots activities or courses at least once a month, and nearly six in 10 did not intend to join social groups catering to older people.

Touch Seniors Activity Centre director Julia Lee said: "Many seniors prefer to keep to themselves after they have retired and may lack the courage to proactively interact with others."

The centre, she said, gets feedback from participants so it can plan programmes that better cater to the interests of seniors and get them to come back for more.