

Growth and family life get airing at youth forum

Participants raise concerns about housing prices and fast pace of life

Phua Mei Pin

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IT WAS supposed to be a forum for young people to talk about life and family in 2050 in the face of Singapore's demographic challenges, but the discussion turned instead into one of jobs and the economy.

The 160 tertiary students who turned up at the Institute of Policy Studies event yesterday had come prepared to share their visions on the kind of society they would like to see in 40 years.

But the guest of honour, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu, steered the conversation towards economic growth, saying that this was needed to ensure Singaporeans could improve their lives.

It did not stop participants, however, from sticking to the theme, as they took turns to raise concerns about how housing prices and Singapore's fast pace of life could affect family life.

Background Story

No need for pessimism over ageing

"There really isn't much need for the kind of pessimism, alarmism and general hand-wringing that surround much of our discourse on population issues. We're not going to be the only or first country that has had to deal with this ageing phenomenon... We actually have tremendous fiscal, financial and institutional resources to cope with ageing."

- Mr Donald Low, senior fellow and assistant dean of research centres at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

"The popular stereotype is that old people are disintegrating... When you young people are 70, you will be in much better shape. You should not be comparing yourselves with 70-year-olds that you see now... You should be comparing yourselves with 50-year-olds. You should be anticipating that by the time you have arrived at the ripe old age of 70, you're really functioning pretty well."

- Associate Professor John Elliott at the National University of Singapore's Department of Psychology

National University of Singapore graduate student Jonathan Lee, 27, rose repeatedly to highlight what he saw as contradictions between national policies on growth and the push for a bigger focus on family.

The Government's emphasis on staying economically competitive, he pointed out, was "incompatible" with its call to individual Singaporeans to put marriage and parenthood ahead of work.

"We do take cues from our leaders," he said.

Responding, Ms Fu suggested that this did not mean that people could not put marriage and parenthood "somewhere near the top, if not the top" of their priorities. Urging young people to see their working life as a long journey, she said: "You can afford to take a few years to go at a lower gear. You can take it slowly for a few years and get back quite easily."

In her opening speech, however, she indicated that the country could not afford to take such a break. A slower or stagnant economy, she warned, could affect employment, which would hit lower-skilled Singaporeans harder.

"If we're not competitive, we run the risk of losing out in this race for investment," she said. "We need good-quality growth, in order for all segments of Singapore to have good jobs and enjoy real wage growth."

Later, she explained to reporters why she chose to focus on these issues with young Singaporeans. "They have 20, 30 years of working life ahead of them," she said. "They should know that this is probably an important consideration that we have not forgotten... The Government is looking at providing good jobs for them."

Yesterday's forum at the Orchard Hotel also covered Singapore's population challenges, with two speakers suggesting that the country relook its view of ageing issues.

Mr Donald Low, a senior fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said that Singapore should try to adapt to the trend instead of trying to mitigate its impact. More funds, he said, could be channelled from its reserves into social welfare infrastructure.

Psychologist John Elliott at the National University of Singapore, too, noted that the elderly can be treated as a resource rather than a liability.

Acknowledging these views, Ms Fu said: "If there are new ways for us to look at how we should treat the issue of ageing... I think they are worth discussing."