

Singapore has to adapt policies to accommodate more diverse families: Desmond Lee

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SINGAPORE - Singapore needs to keep reviewing its policies to accommodate people and families in different circumstances, from single-parent homes to never-married singles, Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee said on Friday (Oct 26).

Also, as society becomes more ethnically diverse, the country has to find new common spaces and ways to sustain social cohesion, he added.

These two strands of societal change were highlighted by Mr Lee when he spoke about diversity at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to mark its 30th anniversary.

The concept of the Singaporean family now includes reconstituted families formed by divorcees who remarry, and people who delay marriage or not marry at all. Their numbers are going up, he said.

Last year, nearly a quarter – 23 per cent – of marriages were remarriages for one or both parties, a 4 percentage point increase from 2000, Mr Lee noted.

There is also a growing number of people who are delaying marriage or not marrying at all.

The number of never-married one-person households nearly doubled to 168,000 between the years 2000 and 2017, he added.

Mr Lee also pointed to other non-traditional households that have emerged in Singapore, such as co-habiting heterosexual and homosexual couples, families in which grandparents take over guardianship of their grandchildren and families in which older siblings have had to step up and take on a parental role to their younger siblings.

"Every individual is still very much part of a family regardless of age, marital status or living arrangement," Mr Lee said.

"Our social policies balance between strong support for family and marriage while making space for the increasingly prominent diversity in family and social forms. We must continue to review our policies to accommodate families in different circumstances."

Families here are becoming more culturally diverse, he noted, as more Singaporeans are marrying partners from a different race or nationality.

Inter-ethnic marriages made up 22 per cent of all marriages registered here last year, an increase of 6 percentage points from 2007.

A significant proportion of Singaporeans are also marrying foreigners, with more than one in three citizen marriages last year involving transnational couples, Mr Lee noted.

"And with this there are more inter-ethnic babies, more young people growing up with diverse cultures to support them and mixed race identities."

With immigration, Singapore is also seeing greater diversity in its cultural make-up over time, he said.

Speaking after Mr Lee, Singapore Management University sociologist Paulin Straughan questioned whether Singapore's "Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others" model will soon be irrelevant.

After all, she noted, over half of marriages last year involved transnational and inter-ethnic couples, and the children of these bi-cultural households may eventually form the majority of society.

"So moving forward we need concrete plans as we curate the Singapore identity, to remember that we have bi-cultural families and new citizens."

When it comes to new citizens, she added, Singaporeans should remember that "we invited them".

"We invited them because we believe that they can bring value to our nation-building endeavour. Surely when we invite them we don't expect them to shred their cultural heritage," she said.

"So we have to be confident as we speak of an inclusive community and society that we are not going to be distracted by mischief-makers on social media who encourage us that xenophobia is okay."

Amid this increasing diversity, Singapore will have to think deeper about how to build a common identity and find new common spaces in which people can have deep discussions, Mr Lee said.

Social cohesion, he said, "involves moving beyond tolerance towards deeper mutual understanding and appreciation for our different communities".

"Building common space is an ongoing conscious and active endeavour as each new generation of Singaporeans seeks to renew the compact. And the common spaces of today may not be enough. We need to find new common spaces, new ways to dialogue in the real world and virtual space."