

## Work demands getting in the way of family time: Survey

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Families in Singapore are doing well but there are challenges and emerging trends that could be addressed, in particular by employers and policymakers.

These include fewer people being satisfied with their marriages, and more people, especially men, saying work gets in the way of their desire for more family time.

The trends were drawn from data collected in national surveys and compiled by academics.

Figures from the 2013 Survey on Social Attitudes of Singaporeans were shared for the first time last week by Institute of Policy Studies researcher Mathew Mathews, who compiled the data with National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan.

Dr Mathews spoke last Friday at a conference in which about 450 people discussed how to better support families.

The proportion of Singaporeans who were satisfied with their family life increased for those who were married or single, both by 6 percentage points, to 95 per cent and 90 per cent respectively, between 2009 and 2013.

But for people who were divorced, separated or widowed, the proportion fell from 83 per cent to 78 per cent over the same period.

While most people were more satisfied with family life, the trend reversed when asked about married life. About 92 per cent of married respondents said they were satisfied with their marriages in 2013, down by 4 percentage points from 2009.

However, Dr Mathews said not to read too much into the four-point drop in marriage satisfaction, which he called "fairly small" and "normal" for surveys.

The survey was conducted annually from 2001 to 2003, then every three to four years.

A nationally representative sample of 2,000 people aged 15 and above were polled in the latest survey, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

Dr Mathews said families in Singapore remain strong. "Singaporeans are well connected with their families and rely on them for a range of emotional, social and instrumental needs," he said.

The survey also polled Singaporeans on work-life balance.

Over half the respondents, or 55 per cent, in 2013 said their work demands ate into their family time more than they liked, up from 47 per cent in 2009.

This was odd, he said, as more businesses now offer work-life harmony schemes such as flexi-time work arrangements.

"What is probably happening is that people's aspirations for work-life harmony are increasing. I think the realisation is hitting more men..."

"Perhaps, this is because women too are expecting more from their partners. With that, more men are reporting this interference between work and family life," said Dr Mathews.

Of the men, 58 per cent expressed this dissatisfaction in 2013, compared with 44 per cent in 2009.

Worrying about work-life balance is a luxury the low-income do not have, said Mrs Cindy Ng-Tay, assistant director of Covenant Family Service Centre.

She urged policymakers to examine how they can extend the same "privileges" to vulnerable groups, who find it hard to cut down on work hours.

"Do we put in barriers for them to achieve this balance? We should look at wage stagnation, and why we are not paying these workers enough," she said.

FaithActs senior social worker Michael Tiew said that for family structures to remain strong, couples should attend marriage preparation courses. "Couples who don't attend such courses won't know what issues they might face in their marriage. The fact that they are entering a new arena in life can contribute to future problems and issues," he said.

Mrs Claire Nazar, a member of the Families for Life council, agreed. She said: "Marriage preparation courses can help couples to learn to work as a team, and handle stress together, under the guidance of experienced marriage educators and counsellors."