

Govt Urged to Do More for Baby Boomers, Transnational Families; Republic Plans to 'Build Capacities' in Response to Changing Demographics

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SINGAPORE — Already, they make up four in 10 marriages in Singapore, and the problems some of them face include legal ones such as immigration, unemployment and marital problems brought about by cultural differences.

Given this shift in Singapore's demographics — the emergence of families in which one spouse is of a different nationality — social workers and sociologists say it is time for government policies to catch up and address the needs of such households.

The past year saw significant efforts made to better coordinate social assistance on the ground — such as the setting up of Social Service Offices across the island to bring resources from various agencies together.

Going forward, the Government plans to “build capacities for tomorrow's challenges”, said Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing in Parliament in September. “Some of these challenges will include the children from cross-cultural marriages,” he added.

Apart from such marriages, another shift in demographics social workers highlighted is in the silver population — baby boomers born between 1947 and 1965, numbering about a million in Singapore, are beginning to cross the 65-year-old mark and voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs), which have long served low-income and less-educated seniors, are concerned that current programmes may not meet their needs.

Challenges Transnational Families Face

Last year, more than 9,000 marriages — or four in 10 — registered in the Republic were between a Singaporean and a non-citizen, according to figures released by the National Population and Talent Division in September.

Of the 42,663 babies born in Singapore last year, only about half of them were born to parents who are both Singaporeans.

Several Members of Parliament (MPs) have, over the year, voiced concerns of transnational families, such as the waiting time for Long-Term Visit Passes (LTVP) or permanent residency applications, particularly for couples who have a Singaporean child, so families can remain together.

Transnational families, noted Dr Tan Ern Ser, Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, are not “homogenous”.

“There are also class differences. Those with the means and connections may actually do better than the locals,” he said.

According to Family Service Centres (FSCs) TODAY spoke to, transnational families who go to them for help tend to be from the lower-income group, comprising older Singaporean men

in their 40s and 50s, who hold blue-collar jobs and earn an average of about S\$1,000 a month, and their foreign wives.

These families would benefit if their spouses could get jobs and contribute to the household income, but many are unable to do so because of the passes they hold.

Currently, foreign spouses of Singaporeans may be granted the LTVP, or the LTVP-Plus that allows them to work and enjoy some subsidised healthcare. However, many worry about whether such passes would be extended when they expire.

MP for Punggol East Lee Li Lian cited the example of a resident, a Vietnamese woman holding an LVTP-Plus. She is married to a Singaporean man, aged 59, the family's sole breadwinner who worked as a taxi driver before suffering a stroke in May. The couple have a five-year-old daughter.

"Despite having support from the Community Development Council and social workers, she understands that these are not long-term solutions and hopes to become a PR to increase her potential of getting a better-paying job to support both her husband and daughter," said Ms Lee.

She suggested providing foreign spouses more avenues that allow them to work here, and giving foreign spouses with families in Singapore priority in obtaining PR status.

Ms Frances Lee, Centre Manager at Care Corner Family Service Centre (Toa Payoh), added that if the passes are not renewed, "the children are left behind and someone else is left to pick up the pieces".

Another issue arising from such marriages is when cultural differences strain the marriage. FSCs are seeing more transnational families approaching them for financial assistance or marital counselling.

About 10 per cent of the 450 cases seen at Care Corner Family Service Centre (Toa Payoh) are families which comprise a foreign spouse, while Fei Yue Family Service Centres see a yearly increase of about 5 per cent or 25 to 30 of such cases.

Aside from communication problems and different cultural expectations, social workers said they have seen cases of spousal abuse. There have also been cases in which children from these families found themselves a step behind when they entered primary school as their mothers' ability to adequately prepare them academically might have been affected by a relatively poorer command of English, said Mrs Rachel Lee, Senior Assistant Director of Fei Yue Family Service Centres.

To help these families, more education and counselling for transnational couples could be made available before or when the marriage is registered, suggested MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC Denise Phua.

Better-educated baby boomers may be neglected

As more is being done to address the needs of an ageing population, such as the expansion of the Seniors Mobility and Enabling Fund this year, social workers also highlighted the need to manage the change in the profile of the silver population.

A generation of better-educated and more affluent baby boomers are entering retirement. They have different needs or may be overlooked as a group, as the seniors who are on the radar of VWOs tend to be the lower-income elderly and those living alone or in rental flats.

“The Government has pumped in a lot of resources and developed many programmes for the poor and isolated elderly, but it is also important to reach out to seniors who may be more highly educated and from middle-income families to promote active ageing and prevent isolation,” said Mrs Lee. Some of them, she added, may have health or family problems for which they need assistance.

For this group of elderly, National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan said retirement villages could benefit them.

“Right now, most families rely on foreign domestic workers, but some of us will also come to the realisation that this is a stop-gap measure that cannot replace infrastructure build-up. What are we going to do if, for example, Indonesia stops sending foreign domestic workers?” said Assoc Prof Straughan.

Costs related to ageing are also a concern. In his National Day Rally speech this year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a Pioneer Generation Package that would help with the medical bills of Singapore’s pioneers who are in their late 60s and older. Details are expected to be revealed in Budget 2014.

Dr Kang Soon-Hock, Head of the Social Science Core at the School of Arts and Social Sciences at SIM University, said medical bills are not the only concern. “Apart from assistance in hospitalisation and outpatient bills, helping to lower home-care costs for the elderly who are living with their families could be another area of help that seniors and their families could benefit from,” he said. **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AMIR HUSSAIN**