

More carrots but the stork won't be lured **Smaller proportion of respondents find parenthood initiatives conducive to having children: IPS survey**

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TODAY, 06 July 2015

Despite greater awareness of the enhancements — including a bigger Baby Bonus and one week of government-paid paternity leave — to the Marriage and Parenthood Package in 2013, the slew of incentives were deemed to be less conducive in nudging Singaporeans to tie the knot and have more children, compared to the previous package rolled out five years earlier.

This was among the findings released today (July 6) of a survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies, which also showed a smaller proportion (37 per cent) of female respondents saying that the measures were conducive for them and their spouses to have more children, compared to their male counterparts (43 per cent).

The survey, which was conducted from July to September last year, consists of face-to-face interviews with 2,000 married respondents aged 21 to 49. It aimed to find out people's perceptions of the 2013 Marriage and Parenthood Package, and a similar survey was carried out in 2009 to determine the attitudes on the 2008 package.

Compared to the previous survey, there was greater awareness among respondents for most measures in the package. However, across the various age groups, fewer found the initiatives to be conducive for themselves or for Singaporeans in general to have more children: Seven in 10 respondents said the package would nudge Singaporeans to have a bigger family, down from almost eight in 10 previously. When it came to themselves, the proportion dropped from 53 per cent to 40 per cent.

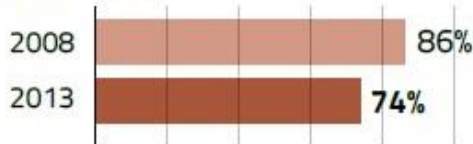
The researchers — IPS research fellow Christopher Gee, principal research fellow Yap Mui Teng and research assistant Loh Soon How — found significant gender differences in the responses. For example, while about 53 per cent of male respondents felt that paternity leave would influence their family-planning decisions, about 46 per cent of female respondents felt the same way. For maternity leave, the proportions were about 58 per cent of the men, and 53 per cent of the women.

As part of the enhancements in 2013, the Baby Bonus was raised from S\$4,000 to S\$6,000 for first two births, and from S\$6,000 to S\$8,000 for third and fourth births. However, the overall proportion of respondents who said the handout would influence their decisions fell to 50 per cent, down from 69 per cent in the previous survey.

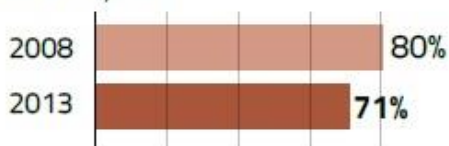
Attitudes towards Marriage and Parenthood Package

- Respondents who said it was conducive for Singaporean couples to have children

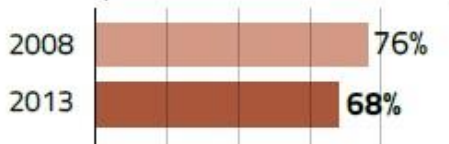
21 to 29 years



30 to 39 years



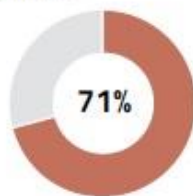
40 to 49 years



Male

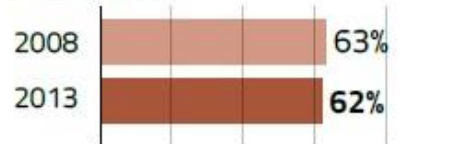


Female

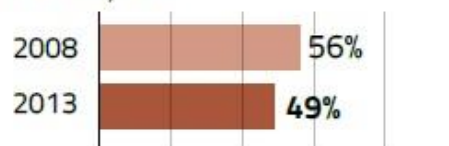


- Respondents who said it was conducive for them and their spouse to have children

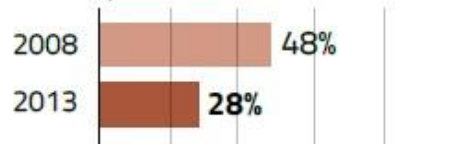
21 to 29 years



30 to 39 years



40 to 49 years



Male



Female



Source: Institute of Policy Studies

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Mr Gee, the lead researcher for the latest survey, pointed out the previous survey was conducted in the midst of the financial crisis, which was why the Baby Bonus could have exacted greater influence on couple's choices. Now, expectations are higher as household incomes rise, and the cost of bringing up a child has also increased, he added. With the enhancements to the package, the Government is spending S\$2 billion a year, up from S\$1.6 billion previously.

The package was first introduced in 2001, and has since been enhanced in 2004, 2008 and 2013. Mr Gee noted that while the Government's annual spending on it has increased substantially from S\$500 million to S\$2 billion, there is little to show for. Between 2000 and last year, the Republic's total fertility rate fell from 1.6 to 1.25.

Mr Gee said while the male respondents seemed willing to share parenting responsibilities, their female counterparts showed some "scepticism and cynicism" on the impact of the initiatives. Policymakers may need a rethink and focus on what women want, he added. Measures facilitating mothers to return to the workforce after childbirth — such as greater

access to infant care, more work-life balance and part-time work arrangements — may have greater impact, he said.

Mr Loh suggested allowing couples to share up to half of the 16 weeks of maternity leave which are currently granted to mothers. This could not only allow women to return to work earlier but also help change social attitudes on gender roles in child rearing.

With women getting married and having babies later in their lives, policymakers have a small window - between the ages of 28 and 40 - to influence women to have more children, said Mr Gee, noting the sharp drop in enthusiasm towards the package from respondents above 40 years old.

Still, Singapore may experience a pick-up in the birth rate in the next five to 10 years, he added. This is because there is a large number of women - born after the Republic adopted a “pro-natalist policy stance” — heading into their 30s during this period. “That’s the silver lining,” Mr Gee said.