

More incentives urged for increased parental leave, work flexibility Help companies accommodate changing workforce, more working parents, experts say

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SINGAPORE — Offering firms more incentives to adopt flexible work arrangements and increasing the quota for childcare leave or maternity leave are some enhancements the Government could make to the Marriage and Parenthood Package this year, sociologists say.

Their comments come after Senior Minister of State (Prime Minister's Office) Josephine Teo, who helps to oversee the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD), said over the weekend that more measures to help soon-to-be and new parents will be rolled out this year, with preliminary ideas to be made public tomorrow (Jan 4).

The emphasis this time round will be on building community support for new parents, Mrs Teo said, given that more women are in the workforce today. "How do I make it possible for women to continue staying active in the workforce and at the same time, be able to care for their children?"

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan said the Government could try to plug this gap by offering companies more incentives for flexible work arrangements.

"If you ask young working parents, they would want to see... not necessarily more leave, but certainly more flexible work options, where one can stay at home with more flexible working hours," said Dr Straughan.

"(Flexible working hours) is something we can boast on paper, but in practice, the take-up rate is low,' she added.

Two hurdles with bringing about the change remain — the nature of the job, and workplace cultures. For instance, employers continue to perceive that workers on flexi-hours would "cheat" them by skiving, while workers fear that working from home would hinder progression, she said.

A quick solution would be to make flexi-work arrangements a statutory requirement, given the tightening manpower supply. But Dr Straughan felt that the Government would prefer offering incentives in the form of grants.

"When it comes to grants and all, how much is enough to shift employers' mindsets? If you talk to employers, especially Small and Medium Enterprises, they'll always tell you it's not enough," she said. "What I would like to see is businesses in partnership with the State, and businesses seeing this ultra-low fertility national problem as a business problem. Therefore, they have to play their part too, to want to transform cultures, and (push) for a major paradigm shift."

Deputy Director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS Thang Leng Leng felt that an area to improve would be the number of child-care leave days, citing the example of hand, foot and mouth disease outbreaks in childcare centres, where children have to stay home.

Dr Tan Ern Ser, Head of the Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies, felt that any new policies should target “reducing costs, increasing financial support, providing more amenities and programmes, and allowing more time (for parents) to perform family- or children-centric things”.

But beyond enhancing the package, he reiterated that couples should continue to be encouraged to focus on the “intrinsic rewards and satisfaction” of having children.

Soon-to-be parents and newlyweds also said that support from their employers and more time with their children are on their wish-list.

Civil servant Rachel Chan, 27, who is expecting, said she is hoping for maternity leave to be extended by 50 per cent to six months.

“Our parents are more than willing to help but we wouldn’t want to burden them,” she said. “Money’s an issue but you can always make do.”

Another 27-year-old civil servant, who wanted to be known only as Ms Chua, said she is hoping for more employer support, even though she is not planning on starting a family yet.

“Maternity leave and money are superficial issues which I can settle on my own. Support from my company is more important. Company culture takes many years to change.”

Improvements were made to the Marriage and Parenthood Package just last year. New fathers were given a second week of paid paternity leave, and the Baby Bonus Cash Gift was extended to the fifth child and beyond, among other things.

When the changes were announced, the NPTD had flagged that it was reviewing how to “work with employers to help parents improve their work-life harmony”.

Amid promising signs that Singapore is set for a second straight year of healthy birth rates, the plan to introduce further help for new parents was not surprising, experts said.

Dr Straughan said: “(2014) was a very good year in terms of births and marriages. One reason could be that we’re riding on that momentum. It’s not a bad idea to keep that momentum up.”