

**Today, Caught in the middle..., 20 Jan 2005, p. H 8 & 9.**

Caught in the middle

'Sandwich generation' also needs to be taken care of, says sociologist

Thursday January 20, 2005

Tor Ching Li  
chingli@newstoday.com.sg

WHILE engaging the young and caring for the old, Singapore must also look into the needs of the "sandwich generation", stressed National University of Singapore sociology don Tan Ern Ser yesterday, at an annual seminar organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

According to a survey Dr Tan commissioned in 2001, some 25 per cent of the Singapore population can be classified as the "sandwich generation" ?that is, those who have to support parents and children.

"This is a substantial minority. They are mainly middle-aged and lower-class," said Dr Tan, who studied the issue of class across 2,250 Singaporeans aged 15 to 64.

This "serious problem" has implications for whether older Singaporeans should be allowed to retire later, and there is also a need to find employment opportunities for them, not forgetting that the middle-aged are particularly vulnerable to retrenchment.

The author of *Does Class Matter?*, which was published last year, pointed out: "By looking after the middle-aged, you are indirectly looking after three generations."

He also believes that by monitoring the pulse of Singapore's middle class ?which makes up some 75 per cent of the population going by income, occupation, education and housing type ?one can diagnose the nation's general well-being.

Despite this, Dr Tan said the issue of social class does not feature much in political discourse.

While social policies here have been framed along the lines of ethnic self-help groups, Dr Tan's findings show that it makes more sense to put these in the context of class.

"With globalisation, there will be an inevitable widening of the income gap, so social policies need to expand Singapore's middle class," he said.

Acknowledging that the Government's policies work towards "levelling up' people by trying to break the poverty cycle through education and other initiatives", Dr Tan called for more to be done.

"The pulse of the nation really lies with the middle class. If they too feel financially squeezed, then something may be wrong with society."

However, in a snap poll of 337 conference participants yesterday on which socio-political division worries them most, religion emerged the top worry with 51 per cent votes, compared to only 16 per cent for class.

Said IPS research fellow Dr Gillian Koh, who chaired the session on domestic issues: "To reiterate, the greatest number of respondents felt that it is religion that posed the most worrying threat to social harmony here at the moment."