

Family-friendly norms key to boosting birth rate

Expert says shorter work hours, more flexible job market, fathers' involvement are pluses

Charissa Yong

Why are women in Sweden and the United States having more babies than women in South Korea and Japan?

Visiting Harvard sociologist Mary Brinton pinpointed three reasons that Singapore can take note of in a public lecture yesterday.

First, shorter working hours make it easier for couples to have more children. Second, more flexible labour markets mean mothers are not locked out of good jobs when they return to the workforce after giving birth.

Also, fathers are expected to be more involved in raising their children and looking after the household, which lessens the burden on

working women.

In her lecture to 250 students and academics at the National University of Singapore, she compared several societies and argued that a combination of workplace culture, labour policies and gender roles can explain their differing birth rates.

"Long work hours are not necessarily required for economic efficiency. They mean you're not at home enjoying family, or managing the household," said Professor Brinton, who researches low fertility rates in Europe and East Asia.

"In many ways, they are the enemy of the family," she added.

Singapore is keen to raise its low total fertility rate, which at 1.24 children per woman is below that of Japan's rate of 1.46.

Sweden and America's total fertility rates hover around 1.9, just below the 2.1 rate that a population needs to be able to replace itself.

Senior Minister of State Josephine Teo, who oversees population matters, also spoke at the lecture organised by the Centre for Family and Population Research and the Global Asia Institute.

She said the Government is supporting young couples who want to have children in three main ways: helping couples own their own homes sooner, providing more infant care and childcare spaces, and helping parents juggle career and family by championing policies like paternity leave and flexi-work arrangements.

"More employers are gracious providers but some show grudging acceptance. We need a fundamental shift in mindsets towards more family-friendly workplaces," she said.

This dovetailed with Prof

Brinton's observation that countries with more family-friendly norms also had higher birth rates.

She cited how Swedish workers leave at 5pm sharp, while Japanese employees leave at 8pm on average. This makes it hard for couples to have more than one child, even if reliable childcare is available, as it is difficult to juggle longer working hours with family commitments.

Such workplace norms also make it difficult for men to contribute to housework and child-rearing, especially if the culture expects them to be breadwinners.

Prof Brinton argued that not being able to rely on men to help out around the house as much can encourage married couples to stop at one child, push mothers to quit their jobs, or even discourage women from marrying.

Rigid employment laws that reward regular workers over those who need more flexible work arrangements are bad for women too.

They make it difficult for women to continue their careers after they return from maternity leave, and so some choose not to have families.

But Prof Brinton and Mrs Teo agreed that legislating maternity leave of beyond six months would be going overboard.

Mrs Teo said mandating more family care leave than businesses can handle may hurt women, as bosses will be less likely to hire them due to the longer leave period.

"Be mindful that you don't push it to the point where employers and co-workers find it difficult to support," she added.

charyong@sph.com.sg