

Visiting Harvard sociologist gives three reasons why some cultures have higher birthrates

Family-friendly workplaces key to seeing more babies born

CHARISSA YONG, THE STRAITS TIMES

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

Visiting Harvard sociologist Mary Brinton identified three reasons 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 means mothers are not locked out of good jobs when they return to the workforce after giving birth.

Third, 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.”

Singapore is keen to raise its



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low total fertility rate, which at 1.24 children a woman is below that of Japan’s rate of 1.46.

Sweden and America’s total fertility rates hover around 1.9, 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.

They are: helping couples own their own homes sooner, providing more infantcare and childcare spaces, and helping them 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 had higher birth rates.

She cited how Swedish workers leave at 5pm, 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 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 can encourage married couples to stop at one child, push mothers to quit their jobs, or 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.

She added: “Be mindful that you don’t push it to the point where employers and coworkers find it difficult to support.”

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