Marriage, families under stress as norms change

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For The Straits Times

Since Singapore gained independence in 1965, government policies and population policies have been an integral part of its nation-building strategies. "Asian family values", broadly conceived as love, care, mutual respect, family ties and commitment, was linked in one of the core nations "Shared Values" in the early 1990s.

Based on these principles, Singapore's public policies have defined ideal family types largely as the three-generational household and the two-parent heterosexual families. Today, Singapore looks distinct from what it was five decades ago. The population has tripled in size, and is more globalised and much older. Different racial and religious groups live together with a higher degree of integration, and family sizes and intergenerational sites remain relatively strong.

While the policies have largely been effective in maintaining an Asian family model by keeping out-of-wedlock births and childlessness low, the divorce rate relatively low by international standards, the definition of acceptable family behaviours have been controversial. A New Unsent letters have increased over the years, such as singlehood, never-married and divorced single parents, and same-sex couples and families. We discuss these issues in our new book, titled Family And Population Changes In Singapore: A Unique Case In Global Family Change.

HIGH CHILDLESSNESS RATE

Some unintended consequences of the public policies and changing ideologies have nevertheless emerged. Today, Singapore is one of the world’s lowest fertility rates, highest childlessness rate, high singlehood rate, and a rapidly ageing population.

Singapore's families are currently under considerable stress. The childlessness rate has increased sharply, from about 6 per cent for women who were born around 1950, to almost one-quarter of the women born between 1966 and 1970 (aged 46 to 50 in 2016). This rate is higher than that in the United States and as high as the highest childlessness rate in Europe registered by German women born in 1968 – 23 per cent (Sieberks, 2017).

At 30 per cent of ever married women have at least one child, this high childlessness rate is large part due to the high proportion of Singapore young adults who have remained single. As of 2016, 17 per cent of Singapore women aged 35 to 39 are single. This rate is also high by international standards.

Even though the singlehood rate in many European countries is higher than this, fertility rates in those countries are higher than that in Singapore because many cohabiting couples have children together. Family policies in those countries allow children who are born out of wedlock and their parents access to public benefits.

To tackle the low fertility rate in Singapore, it is of foremost importance to reduce the barriers for marriage. Statistics show that singlehood rates are highest among Singapore Chinese women who on average are better educated and have a higher aspiration for, and commitment to, their careers. For them, one in five remains single by the age of 35 to 39.

For this group, judging from the continually declining fertility rate, a long maternity leave and baby bonus have not been effective incentives. However, more equal opportunity of employment advancement for women both before and after marriage may make them less hesitant to enter into marriage. A more flexible distribution of parental leave between spouses which may enable greater male participation may also be appealing.

EDUCATION AND MARRIAGE

One of the most significant social changes in the 20th century was the rapid increase in women’s education around the world. In Singapore, female gross tertiary enrolment rate has increased phenomenally from 4 per cent in 1970 to 45 per cent in 2015, surpassing most Western countries. As the reported in the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report, women have outnumbered men in enrolling in tertiary education in more than 100 countries in the world (The World Economic Forum, 2015). Singapore is no exception.

Our previous research has shown that the proportion of women in tertiary education, among many indicators, is the highly correlated with marriage and fertility rates across regions. Many societies, however, have yet to make adequate adjustments to this sweeping social change in gender roles at the workplace and at home. In America and some European countries that have more gender egalitarian social norms and practices, better-educated women have started to have a higher marriage rate, slower divorce rate, and a higher fertility rate. In contrast, in more conservative societies, women with higher education have lower marriage rates than those with lower education.

Analysts have argued that marriage is viewed as increasingly unattractive to women in East Asia because it not only comes with a whole package of obligations to care for the young and old family members but also requires a high cost on their careers.

FACTORS AGAINST MARRIAGE

The low marriage and fertility trends in Singapore can be seen to reflect many young adults’ hesitation to form families, despite their desire to do so, due to several factors. First is the economy’s slow institutional adaptation to the rapid change in gender roles both at the workplace and at home. Second, the “Kiasu” (afraid to lose or afraid to fall) culture that highly values success in any competitive environment that leads to long work hours and high social pressure to achieve.

Third, a high cost of living, including the cost of child-rearing and caring for ageing parents. Fourth, the long waiting time for a public housing unit for prospective couples. And fifth, the narrow definition of “family” on which social policies and discourses are based that provided limited support or penalised other family forms, including never-married or divorced single-parent families, cohabiting unions, single and same-sex partnering.

A combination of these factors leads many young adults to perceive attaining a “successful” marriage and raising successful children as difficult or having a low return. To raise marriage and fertility rates, some fundamental cultural shifts and institutional adaptations are imperative. It is necessary to reduce gender inequality both at the workplace and at home, change the “Kiasu” culture by reducing work hours and relaxing pressure for competition for children and adults, increase longer-term in-kind or direct support for marriage and child-rearing costs, and to accept a broader set of family circumstances and choices of family types for Singaporeans.

Instead of focusing on the ideal structure of family, we will serve well for society to be reminded of the original definition of the “Singapore Family Values” – love, care, and concern, full responsibility, mutual respect, commitment, and communication – which can also be attained in other family configurations as well. In the next chapter, we look at how young adults today face a different set of life circumstances and challenges from previous generations, and how different meaning and values to marriage and parenthood. Perhaps some would prefer to cohabit first, which may lead to marriages. Relaxed divorce law might paradoxically increase marriages if young adults knew that it is a way out if the marriage does not work out; or the possibility of leaving a marriage might keep their sponges damp.

Open discussions about what Singaporeans view as desirable family norms and functions should occur. Public policies should then be adjusted based on agreement emerged from these discussions.

* Population Matters is a monthly column by PhD in Family and Population Research (FPR) from the National University of Singapore and Director of Family and Population Research (FPR), where Shu Hu is Research Fellow.