

THE SUPPER CLUB | JEAN YEUNG

# 'Men now expected to bring home the bacon - and cook it'

Singapore's fertility rate is so low partly because young people have high aspirations about marriage and this, plus the financial cost, puts them off even starting relationships, says Professor Jean Yeung, 56. The director of the newly launched Centre for Family and Population Research also tells Rachel Au-Yong about getting fathers more involved, and her views on single-parent benefits.



ST PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KEMBURAJU THANGARAJAN & ADAM LEE

■ *Singapore is not the only country with low birth rates (the total fertility rate last year was 1.25, below the replacement rate of 2.1). Why do you think this is so?*

One big reason for low fertility is that institutional and behavioural adaptations have not caught up with how quickly women's education has increased. Countries started educating their women because they wanted them to be part of the labour market, and help the economy grow faster.

Singapore is full of superwomen - they are expected to do a lot. In their whole lives they're told to be successful in school. After that, the natural direction is for them to find fulfilling careers. So family-rearing takes a back seat.

■ *What's making it so difficult for women to have it all?*

It's not reasonable to expect one person to have a job, take care of the home, and watch over ageing parents and young children.

Look at how high the cost of living is - you practically need two earners to raise the family. And at the moment that means time away from the family. So we need support from the spouse, but also the employer. Both forms of support can be improved in Singapore. The work culture isn't very family-friendly. Employers may be obliged to give maternity leave, but most are not very supportive.

■ *So how can an employer show support?*

Flexible working hours, or maybe working from home. It takes a huge mindset change. We need to get to the stage where women don't feel they're going to be passed over for a promotion or fired if they take maternity-related leave. If society thinks that having babies is important, then every segment needs to pay the price for it, including the businesses. It will be expensive.

Of course, it is not only about money, but money is a big concern in Singapore.

■ *You have said men here are not involved as much.*

According to statistics, men do less than women. Asian men do less than North American or European men. So this is not unique to Singapore.

Young men in Asia don't have role models for involved fathers. The last few generations were clearly gender-specific - men didn't do much housework.

But we are seeing more men, young men in particular, wanting to spend more time with their families. Latest research also shows they think the newly introduced paternity leave (the week-long leave was announced in 2013) is an incentive to have babies.

■ *What can be done to accelerate the mindset change to get fathers more involved?*

Increased paternity leave is a start. But having a longer period of time where fathers can take

care of their child alongside mothers would be good.

Longer paternity leave is tricky, though. Some countries have it but no one's taking it, because there's the impression you're not committed to your work.

Clearly, there's a mindset change now. In the past, women expected men to bring home the bacon. Now they also expect them to cook it.

Anyway, I suspect most men enjoy spending time with their families. If we can cut back on the working hours, relax a little, and develop good relationships with our partners and children, that will help.

■ *Did your husband help you raise your kids?*

We are both academics (her hus-

band, Professor Bernard Yeung, is dean of the National University of Singapore Business School) and we were very busy. We'll celebrate our 33rd anniversary in two months. He's always spent time with the kids (a son, now 27, and daughter, 22), whether it's talking to them or taking care of them when they had chicken pox. Also, he likes to cook.

No matter what stage of our lives, we cover each other. If one of us was going through tenure, the other would be at home more. I still did most of the parenting, like most mothers, but he helped to cover me, and I, him.

■ *Any practical advice for fathers on how to support the family?*

When I first came to Singapore (in 2008, from the United States), I was involved in the Dads for Life

movement. They used to organise activities for fathers to read to their kids, or sleepover nights, or some sports competition in a park. These were small things to raise awareness on how a father can participate in his child's life. We should continue to do that.

Also, a lot of fathers are uncomfortable with handling a baby. So we can be more sensitive about their insecurities, and encourage fathers to have more opportunities to handle their children.

■ *We have an increasing number of singles. What are your views on this?*

Another huge reason for the low fertility rate here is the low marriage rate. About 30 per cent of men and women here have never married before the age of 40. You have to deal with both together.

Singaporeans have high aspirations for marriage. Many regard it as a sacred relationship. They want to do it right or else they won't do it at all.

A lot of people are not getting married because of the financial pressures. There's also a lot of pressure to "churn out" one or two really successful children. That takes time and money.

Ironically, because marriage is so sacred and you can't afford to fail - the policies today only mainly support two-parent families and divorce is never fun - a lot of young people hesitate to even start.

■ *At the same time, we have a high number of divorces.*

A high divorce rate signals that families are experiencing a lot of stress, both financial and psychological. It's a signal that young families need a lot of support from family or the Government.

■ *Some politicians and activists push for more benefits for single parents, to put them on the same level as married parents.*

Research in the US shows that kids brought up by single parents, if they have the same amount of financial support and the same close relationship with both parents, can do just as well as kids in two-parent families.

We've been obsessed about the formal structure of families, but we should be looking at the relationships among family members. That's what keeps a family close.

■ *But the Government has pointed out that giving single parents the same amount of benefits might encourage single parenthood.*

That has no empirical basis, at least I have not seen such evidence in Singapore. The Government's emphasis on family and marriage is the right thing to do - you want to keep families intact as much as you can. But nobody ever starts a marriage wanting a divorce. Sometimes, having a couple fight all the time is also not the right way to go.

American President Barack Obama was brought up in a single-parent family. So were some ministers here. If the Government can provide assistance when a family falters, it should. Otherwise the children will suffer, and so would the parents. These are high costs for a society.

■ *Perhaps some resistance comes from more conservative circles.*

One thing we should be clear about is that the family has taken many different forms. Families didn't always look like the ones we have today.

■ *Activists for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community here have been making their voices heard. Are LGBT families about to be a reality?*

Every society has to decide what kind of family forms it wants, and what kind of policies it wants to support these families.

As far as I understand, Singapore isn't ready to go that far.

■ *Our citizen population is just over three million out of five million, and expected to shrink further. Should we be anxious about the possibility of becoming the minority?*

If you are looking at economic growth, then you're probably looking at population growth, and a 1.2 birth rate is not going to get you there. So migration needs to continue.

Difficult as it is, I think there's no other way but giving more financial and in-kind help for marriage and having babies. But I don't think we've done enough yet.

A one-time baby bonus is not going to work. For countries that managed to increase the fertility rate, like France and Sweden, the financial benefits are a long-term commitment from the government. That might be something that Singapore isn't ready to finance just yet... The country needs some fundamental rethinking of how we want the education system, housing system, workplace and public safety nets to work together to support family, and realistically consider what kinds of policies will be most likely to achieve our goals.

■ *Tell us more about the Centre for Family and Population Research.*

We have 27 faculty members from departments like sociology, economics and psychology. Some are interested in family stress during different life stages, others on ageing issues, like how to care for the elderly. We run training programmes on research methods, and practical courses like working with elderly adults and managing family trauma.

Some colleagues and I are interested in demographic trends and human capital issues in China, Korea and India. We plan to collaborate and contribute our knowledge to Singapore society.

✉ [rachelay@sph.com.sg](mailto:rachelay@sph.com.sg)

## On the menu

**Sapora Italiano**  
1 Create Way, #01-06  
NUS University Town

- Zucchini soup: \$11.90
- Mushroom soup: \$12.90
- Ice lemon tea: \$3.90
- **Total including tax:**  
\$30.70

## WATCH IT

[www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com)

**PROFESSOR JEAN YEUNG** on Singapore's low fertility rate



Download a QR code reader app on your smartphone and scan this code for more information.