

'SIGNIFICANT GENDER DIFFERENCES' IN RESPONSES

More carrots, but the stork won't be lured

Smaller proportion of respondents finds parenthood initiatives conducive to having children: IPS survey

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SINGAPORE – Despite greater awareness of the enhancements — including a bigger Baby Bonus and one week of

government-paid paternity leave — to the Marriage and Parenthood Package in 2013, the slew of incentives were deemed to be less conducive in nudging Singaporeans to tie the knot and have more children, compared with the previous package rolled out five years earlier.

This was among the findings released yesterday of a survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies, which also showed a smaller

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Incentives 'not enough' to nudge S'poreans to marry, have children

Changes in culture, mindset needed to rectify the situation, say family experts and MPs

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SINGAPORE – If there was ever any doubt, the findings of the latest survey on the attitudes towards the enhanced Marriage and Parenthood Package have well and truly put to rest any notion that incentives could spur Singaporeans to marry and have more children.

This was the view yesterday among family experts and Members of Parliament (MPs) whom TODAY spoke to, and they added that the dismal situation could have reached a stage where cultural and mindset shifts — especially at the workplace — are required to turn things around.

Despite significant enhancements

to the package in 2013 — in which the Government's annual spending on it went up by 25 per cent to S\$2 billion — the survey by the Institute of Policy Studies found that respondents were less enthused about the measures compared to the previous package.

Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Social and Family Development, said the findings showed that society has reached a point where it needs to "revise its assumption that material incentives are what it takes to attract people to have babies".

"It is time to also invest resources to help the younger generations see the innate joy of parenthood... Raising one's own children should not simply be reduced to a utilitarian equation, balancing the material cost of what one receives and gives up," she said.

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Lily Neo, who also sits on the GPC, said it boiled down to the fact that women often

have to choose between career and family. "No matter how much you tweak (the package), it's to do with the business culture," she said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan said people who have chosen to keep their family size small are "acutely aware" of opportunity costs in having more children, such as career setbacks and the loss of personal freedom.

No amount of financial incentives can allay their concerns or sway their decisions, she said.

Associate Professor Straughan cited the cost of being overlooked by employers for promotions, for instance.

The situation could remain unless bosses adjust the evaluation system, which rewards those who place work as a priority, she added.

Marine Parade GRC MP Tin Pei Ling said employers should evaluate female employees based on their potential and quality of work, instead of solely judging them on how

much work they do or the number of months they worked in a particular year.

Compared to men, women may also tend to feel a stronger sense of responsibility for their child's developmental years, and may develop feelings of guilt if they do not sacrifice their career, she noted.

It is hard for the Government to tackle this psychological aspect, although increasing the accessibility and quality of childcare may help to some extent, she said.

The women TODAY spoke to reiterated that being able to devote enough time and attention to their children is the most important factor when it comes to family-planning decisions.

Civil servant Cindy Tan, 30, said: "If there were more affordable childcare centres near the workplace, parents would be able to spend more time with (their children)."

Ms Ansellia Teo, 34, said the Government could even mandate companies to allow greater flexibility in working hours. "This will instil the importance of work-life balance.

"For example, companies could be less (rigid about) taking leave and days off. Some even make staff feel guilty for taking medical leave," the events manager said.

Society has reached a point where it needs to revise its assumption that material incentives are what it takes to attract people to have babies.

Ms Denise Phua
MOULMEIN-KALLANG
GRC MP, WHO CHAIRS
THE GOVERNMENT
PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEE (GPC) FOR
SOCIAL AND
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

proportion (37 per cent) of female respondents saying that the measures were conducive for them and their spouses to have more children, compared with their male counterparts (43 per cent).

The survey, which was conducted from July to September last year, consists of face-to-face interviews with 2,000 married respondents aged 21 to 49. It aimed to find out people's perceptions of the 2013 Marriage and Parenthood Package, and a similar survey was carried out in 2009 to determine the attitudes on the 2008 package.

Compared with the previous survey, there was greater awareness among respondents for most measures in the package.

However, across the various age groups, fewer found the initiatives to be conducive for themselves or for Singaporeans in general to have more children: Seven in 10 respondents said the package would nudge Singaporeans to have a bigger family, down from almost eight in 10 previously.

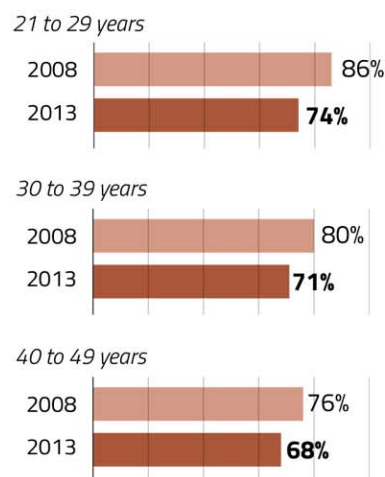
When it came to themselves, the proportion dropped from 53 per cent to 40 per cent. The researchers — IPS research fellow Christopher Gee, principal research fellow Yap Mui Teng and research assistant Loh Soon How — found significant gender differences in the responses.

For example, while about 53 per cent of male respondents felt that paternity leave would influence their family-planning decisions, about 46

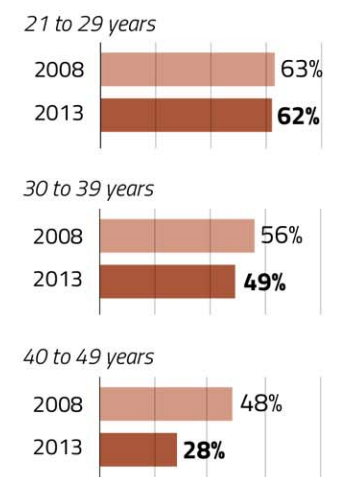
Mr Gee said while the male respondents seemed willing to share parenting responsibilities, their female counterparts showed some 'scepticism and cynicism' on the impact of the initiatives. Policymakers may need a rethink and focus on what women want, he added.

Attitudes towards Marriage and Parenthood Package

• Respondents who said it was conducive for Singaporean couples to have children



• Respondents who said it was conducive for them and their spouse to have children



Source: Institute of Policy Studies

per cent of female respondents felt the same way. For maternity leave, the proportions were about 58 per cent of the men, and 53 per cent of the women.

As part of the enhancements in 2013, the Baby Bonus was raised from S\$4,000 to S\$6,000 for first two births, and from S\$6,000 to S\$8,000 for third and fourth births.

However, the overall proportion of respondents who said the handout would influence their decisions fell to 50 per cent, down from 69 per cent in the previous survey.

Mr Gee, the lead researcher for the latest survey, pointed out the previous survey was conducted in the midst of the financial crisis, which was why the Baby Bonus could have exacted greater influence on couple's choices. Now, expectations are higher as household incomes rise, and the cost of bringing up a child has also increased, he added.

With the enhancements to the package, the Government is spending S\$2 billion a year, up from S\$1.6 billion previously. The package was first introduced in 2001, and has since been

enhanced in 2004, 2008 and 2013. Mr Gee noted that while the Government's annual spending on it has increased substantially from S\$500 million to S\$2 billion, there is little to show for.

Between 2000 and last year, the Republic's total fertility rate fell from 1.6 to 1.25.

Mr Gee said that while the male respondents seemed willing to share parenting responsibilities, their female counterparts showed some "scepticism and cynicism" on the impact of the initiatives.

Policymakers may need a rethink and focus on what women want, he added. Measures facilitating mothers to return to the workforce after childbirth — such as greater access to infant care, more work-life balance and part-time work arrangements — may have greater impact, he said.

Mr Loh suggested allowing couples to share up to half of the 16 weeks of maternity leave which are currently granted to mothers. This could not only allow women to return to work earlier, but also help change social attitudes on gender roles in child-rearing.

With women getting married and having babies later in their lives, policymakers have a small window — between the ages of 28 and 40 — to influence women to have more children, said Mr Gee, noting the sharp drop in enthusiasm towards the package from respondents above 40 years old.

Still, Singapore may experience a pick-up in the birth rate in the next five to 10 years, he added. This is because there is a large number of women — born after the Republic adopted a "pro-natalist policy stance" — heading into their 30s during this period. "That's the silver lining," Mr Gee said.