

What's next for pro-parenthood measures? Focus on work culture

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The Singapore Government recently announced enhancements to its parenthood package by further lowering the costs of childcare, education and healthcare. This is by no means its first attempt at using subsidies or grants to encourage married couples to have children, and is unlikely to be the last.

Population matters in Singapore are existential in nature. Singapore's total fertility rate was 1.14 last year, among the lowest in the world and similar to other East Asian societies which have experienced ultra-low fertility.

While population levels can be sustained through naturalisation, having new generations of children born and raised here is essential if we are to have a population core deeply rooted to the country and its values. It is not only in the collective interest to ensure population growth so that a future Singapore workforce can be sustained, as is often argued by those with an eye on the country's economic vibrancy. Parenthood is also an important individual aspiration for many young Singaporeans.

The 2016 Marriage and Parenthood survey conducted by the National Population and Talent Division polled close to 6,000 singles and married people aged 45 and below.

A majority of married respondents indicated their intention to have two or more children, while only 3 per cent had intentions to remain childless. However, there was clear disparity between aspirations and reality; according to the Department of Statistics, last year, 66 per cent of ever-married women aged between 40 and 49 had two or more children, 22 per cent had one, while 12 per cent did not have any.

Parental aspirations are ultimately socio-cultural. Perhaps such aspirations have also been kept alive because of the Government's relentless focus on this matter for years. But it takes much more than pro-parenthood attitudes to start and grow a family. Couples need to assess carefully whether parenthood is indeed achievable given their circumstances. The same survey found that financial costs and the stress of raising children were the most widely cited reasons for not having more children.

These concerns are neither unreasonable nor without cause. Living in a global city is expensive. Child-related expenses ranging from food, education and healthcare can be sizeable, especially if parents adopt the logic



that only the best – and often most expensive – for their child will do.

Then there are the opportunity costs involved in child-rearing, especially for women who stop work or work fewer hours. There are inevitable lifestyle adjustments, such as less leisure time.

Parenthood is also stressful. In the child's early years, ensuring adequate caretaking provisions is a common preoccupation. During school-going years, the constant need to ensure that children are adequately prepared and coping with the demands of the education system can take a toll.

Undoubtedly, Singaporeans look to the Government to make parenthood less costly and stressful. In the past decade, the Government has been responsive to these concerns and has tackled them on various fronts – it gave generous "baby bonus" grants and introduced co-savings schemes, extended maternity and paternity leave, ramped up childcare provision and increased subsidies for pre-school and housing substantially.

It also introduced schemes to better reconcile work and parenthood commitments, and offered more financial assistance with artificial reproduction technologies. It even acted to check

the rapid rise in price of baby milk powder to ensure other affordable, high-quality options.

The latest measures by the Government will mean substantially more subsidies for pre-school costs tiered by parents' household income. Many more parents will also qualify for subsidies with a rise in the income ceiling for this assistance. Childhood vaccinations at polyclinics and Community Health Assist Scheme General Practitioner clinics will also be subsidised. These measures are also accompanied by various changes in the education system such as the reduction in emphasis on examinations, especially in primary school.

These measures, when combined, will hopefully make the prospect of raising a child sound less daunting for couples who want children but are intimidated by the prospect of raising them in what they think is an expensive and stressful city.

Besides this, the increased emphasis on levelling the playing field for children who are not from wealthy backgrounds, by raising government subsidies for tertiary education, should be a relief to many parents.

Parents clearly want their

children to succeed. If they perceive that financial status will be an impediment to their future generation's life prospects, they might be apprehensive about having children. While one cannot help the circumstances of one's birth, at the very least, those born into families of fewer resources can count on the nation to provide a leg up.

The Government's heavy investment in pre-school education to make it highly affordable, and the reassurance of subsidies at tertiary level, including for more expensive medical school training, will hopefully increase optimism among parents that Singapore society will give a fair chance to their children despite their socioeconomic status.

Looking at the breadth of pro-natalist policies, the Government has certainly done much to address the challenge of low fertility. However, an even more robust approach to promoting family-friendly work culture is what is needed now.

The gap between work practices in Singapore and in societies that pride themselves on cultivating conducive family-friendly workplaces is substantial.

For example, Singaporean workers seldom assert that they

"might not respond to work e-mails after office hours" (a tagline common among many employees in more family-friendly societies) or that they need to leave work on time to attend to childcare needs. Job redesign to allow two part-time employees to share a position is also uncommon.

Legislating family-friendly work policies might be perceived as jeopardising business competitiveness. Nevertheless, more state intervention to prod workplaces into being family-friendly environments might be necessary, even if it is insufficient on its own. Business and individual efforts are also needed. However, voluntary adoption of best practices to cultivate family-friendly work cultures is likely to be slow and uneven, given that the logic of profit maximisation dominates businesses. Further enhancements to parenthood packages should focus on encouraging family-friendly practices.

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