

Singapore has a short 15-year window to promote parenthood. It starts now

This also requires tackling concerns young Singaporeans have about their own future and that of the country.

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Singapore has a golden 15-year window to throw everything it has at promoting parenthood, looking at the demographic data.

Two bulges in the population pyramid grouped by age profiles of citizens found in the Government's Population in Brief 2022 report light the way.

The first bulge points to a population swell in people aged 55 to 64 – our first baby boom made of Generation Xers born to parents of the Pioneer and older Merdeka generation vintage.

A second bulge appears some 30 years later, comprising Singaporeans aged 25 to 34 today: Millennials and older Gen Z children of those from the first bulge – its echo.

We are now on the precipice of a potential second echo – where Millennials and Gen Zers are coming of age to have children. The median age of women who have their first child is 31, according to the same Population in Brief report.

With the total fertility rate (TFR) coming down to a historic low of 1.05, now is the optimal time to try to reverse this trend before the population ages and there are fewer couples in this child-bearing window.

We know young single Singaporeans want children. Eight in 10 aged between 21 and 35 polled in a 2022 survey by the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) say they want to marry and 77 per cent want children.

Married Singaporeans in the same survey overwhelmingly indicated a preference for two or more children – 92 per cent of them – but half (51 per cent) have just one child.

Singapore has a shot if we can get the biggest proportion of these young adults to translate their aspirations for a family into reality – before today's 20-year-olds turn 35.

It is time that we – the Government, our citizens and community – throw everything and the kitchen sink at the challenge.

GREATER SUPPORT FOR FAMILY FORMATION

Budget 2023 marked a renewed effort to promote marriage and parenthood.

Attributing the slump in parenthood to the 2022 Tiger year, generally associated with lower births among the Chinese, Ms Indraneel Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office overseeing NPTD, last Friday highlighted a suite of support for the early stages of family formation, most announced by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong two weeks prior.

This includes priority for a Build-To-Order (BTO) flat for first-time applicants with children and couples aged 40 and below, and subsidies for resale flats, recognising the importance of a new home as couples contemplate having children, and reinforcing this longstanding social compact with this generation of Singaporeans.

Greater financial support through a larger Baby Bonus, bigger contribution to the Child Development Account (CDA) and a larger CDA First Step Grant will also be extended.

State-funded paternity leave and infant care leave will be boosted, with firmer steps taken to increase the adoption of flexible work arrangements.

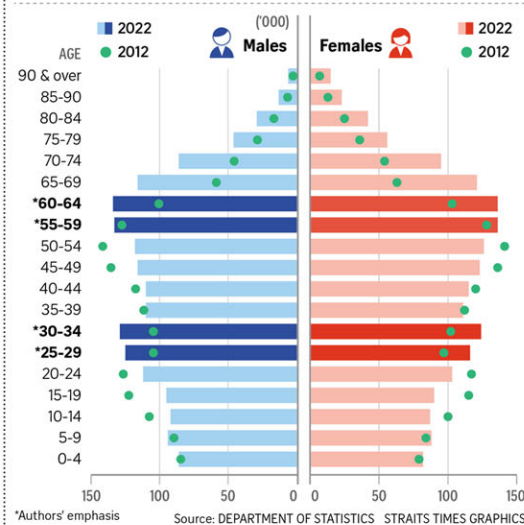
SQUEEZING PARENTHOOD INTO MODERN LIVES

Many have questioned if these policies will move the needle since past measures have not shifted the TFR to anywhere close to the 2.1 replacement rate nor recovery to 1.4, the level when the first comprehensive set of marriage and parenthood measures were introduced in 2001.

This was when the Baby Bonus and the Third Child Paid



Population of Singapore by age group



Maternity Scheme were introduced. Flexible work arrangements, and marriage and paternity leave arrived at the civil service to set the lead for the country. The childcare subsidy scheme was also modified to cover more flexible access to services beyond full-day or half-day care.

Much more support has been provided since, including a big shift to allow social egg freezing which will be implemented in 2023. This will widen the child-bearing window for Singaporean women.

Will young people themselves respond positively to these moves to settle down and have children or have attitudes towards parenthood over the years metastasised and taken root? Worryingly, young Singaporeans' desire for marriage and parenthood have waned in recent years.

While an already low 35 per cent of respondents to the National Youth Council's flagship National Youth survey said it was very important to be married as a life goal in its 2010 poll, only 29 per cent felt the same in its 2019 edition.

Seventeen per cent said it was "not necessary to marry" in 2010, but this sentiment surged upwards to 41 per cent in 2019. Thirty-four per cent indicated it was very important to have children in 2010, but only 27 per cent agreed in 2019.

These trends are corroborated by NPTD's Marriage and

Parenthood surveys. Eighty per cent of the 21- to 35-year-old single respondents said they intended to marry in 2021, six percentage points lower than in a 2012 survey.

Although the majority still want children, respondents who said they did not want them in the 2021 survey were far more troubled by concerns over providing children with the proper upbringing, over having the necessary time, energy, money and the ability to juggle work and life, compared with respondents of a similar survey conducted in 2016.

TACKLING ATTITUDES OVER HAVING KIDS

What is the cause of that pessimism? When political leaders, captains of industry and peers consider the economic and geopolitical disruptions facing the world and Singapore, the outlook for 20- to 35-year-olds seems increasingly grim.

Having children was a rite of passage and a natural course of adulthood like marriage and securing a job, but something has shifted. The World Values Survey conducted in Singapore in 2020 by IPS recorded a marked difference in opinion by age groups on the question of whether it is "a duty towards society to have children". The younger the respondent, the more likely he or she said it was a question of personal choice.

While only 18.2 per cent of

those who were 51 to 65 years of age among the 2,005 participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with that notion, and 11.1 per cent among those above 65 said the same, 26.2 per cent among the 36- to 50-year-olds also disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement and 27.3 per cent among the 21- to 35-year-olds said the same.

Overall, only 21.8 per cent of the full Singapore sample disagreed with this notion that it is a duty in Singapore when compared with countries in the developed West, like Sweden where 77.3 per cent disagreed that anyone had a duty to society to have a child, and Britain where 66.4 per cent in the survey felt that way.

Our colleagues who conducted the study here noted that, thankfully, anti-natalist sentiments in the West that think of having children as being selfish or irrational, had not yet taken root here. These views usually comprise concerns about the environmental impact of overpopulation, pessimism about human life, the severe opportunity cost of parenting, and simply, the philosophical conundrum of working out if anyone wishes to be born in the first place.

VIEWS OF THE FUTURE

We need to study the internal and deeper attitudinal landscape that today's millennials and Gen Z Singaporeans contend with in thinking about having children. We recall that millennials came of age at around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis, which was when another kind of flexibility became mainstreamed – contracts had shorter tenures, larger components of remuneration were made variable, and job benefits were trimmed or removed.

We hear young Singaporeans often citing the changes their generation faces – from the end of lifelong work contracts to the looming end-of-life challenges they will have to help their parents cope with; the climate crises and the worry of straining earth's carrying capacity further; and the double-edged reality of living in online communities where their "circles of care" are virtual with little help for the corporeal difficulties of supporting a spouse and caring for a baby.

Older Singaporeans might dismiss this, saying: "We lived at a time of great socio-economic upheaval, rebuilding Singapore after World War II, and survived the threats of a Cold War. These difficult circumstances did not stop our parents from having us nor dissuade us from having you."

But the crux of the problem is this: Older generations of Singaporeans chose to have children first, then dealt with the challenges of nurturing the family as they went along. They had large communities, big families and abundant social capital to share the demands of care with, exchange wisdom, and draw on connections to help their children thrive.

In contrast, Singaporean millennials and Zoomers probably want to assure themselves first that they will not be adding to the planet's ecological strain, they can shield their offspring from the stressors of life they have experienced, and they are able to support them both materially and in the less tangible ways of affording quality time and care, before taking that leap into parenthood.

While this sense of prudence and responsibility driving hesitant young Singaporeans should be applauded, at the national level, the narrative that only the paranoid survive, and that these are indeed the most difficult and uncertain of times because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, and the United States-China decoupling, could sap away the hope of a brighter future.

Fear is the enemy. We realise that feeding the narrative of Singapore's demographic death spiral to spur young Singaporeans into getting married and having children is a counterproductive exercise. It will not help to keep the anti-natalist sentiment in check.

But while the material conditions were dire in the 1960s, Singaporeans and their leaders believed that the longer-term trajectory of the country and region turned upwards.

Today, the material base of life in Singapore is first-class and first-world, but what do Singaporeans see when they look ahead? Which way does the arrow go? What are the stories of the future that they are telling each other? How are these best captured?

Perhaps the remaining ministry budget debates as well as the Forward Singapore exercise could be springboards into the difficult conversations on topics that our millennials and Zoomers are consumed by, to understand them and create a more hopeful future together.

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Having children was a rite of passage and a natural course of adulthood like marriage and securing a job, but something has shifted. When people were asked in a 2020 survey conducted here whether it is "a duty towards society to have children", the younger the respondent, the more likely he or she said it was a question of personal choice. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY