

## **What Do Children Bring to Parents?**

**Dr Zheng Mu, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, NUS**

***As featured in Lianhe Zaobao, 2 Apr 2017***

Earlier this year, progress has been made on paternity leave. Based on relevant regulations of Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, from 1 January 2017, eligible working fathers are entitled to 2 weeks of paid paternity leave funded by the Government. Moreover, from 1 July 2017, working fathers get to share up to 4 weeks of their wife's 16 weeks of Government-Paid Maternity Leave. Moving from maternity leave only, to fathers sharing 1 week of their wife's maternity leave, then to this year's two major changes, what can be seen is fathers' increasing involvement in childcare, as well as the joint efforts of the government, society and families to ameliorate the continued decline in fertility.

Singapore's fertility levels have fallen since the early 1970s, especially after 1975. Specifically, Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) was 3.07 in 1970, which means that each woman of childbearing age would have an average of 3.07 children in her lifetime. This figure dropped to 2.08 in 1975, and in 1977 to 1.82, falling below the replacement fertility. In general, a TFR around 2.1 is needed to maintain a stable population level without migration, that is, the replacement fertility. In 2016, Singapore's TFR was only 1.20. It is true that Singapore's depressed fertility has been affected by many factors, such as individualized lifestyles, lengthened education completion, increased pressures of living, and rising cost of childcare. However, one factor that cannot be ignored is the changing role of women in work and family life. On the one hand, the process of modernization has given women more opportunities to pursue personal growth and expand their careers. Women's improved status in education and socioeconomic status has enabled them to prosper and thrive on the workplace. Despite these changes, it is undeniable that the responsibilities for caring for the family and managing household chores still fall largely on women's shoulders. Singaporean women have been faced with increasing difficulty in balancing work and family.

The rising pressures shouldered by women and the accompanying low birth rates are also common in other Asian countries. In a speech delivered at the National University at the beginning of this year, Mary Brinton, Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, divided the society into four types based on the relationship between husband and wife in family and work: the traditional type, that is, the conventional model of "breadwinner husband and homemaker wife"; pro-work conservative type, that is, women need to thrive in both work and family; the flexible egalitarian type, such like in the United States, where women can autonomously choose their roles in family and work; the full egalitarian type such as in the Nordic countries, where men and women equally enjoy the right to develop their careers and share the burden of family responsibilities. Asian countries such as Singapore, Japan, and South Korea are all classified as pro-work conservative societies. In these societies, women are faced with immense pressure to take care of both family and work. Prof. Brinton further discovered in her research that, indeed, the countries that are mainly pro-work conservative tend to have lower fertility levels; whereas, countries that mainly adopt flexible egalitarianism and full egalitarianism, TFRs are almost all higher than 1.50.

Based on research, compared with other East Asian countries, China's gender relation is relatively equal. However, even so, in recent years research on China has generally pointed to the increasing pressure on women in the workplace and the ever heavier burden on family life. In October 2015, the Chinese government implemented the universal two-child policy, thus ending its one-child policy since the early 1980s. Although the actual number of births of 2016 was higher than that of 2015 after the policy change, the scale of the effect is still lower than expected. Although this is affected by many factors such as the cost of childcare, it cannot be ignored that it is closely related to the unbalanced relationship across gender in family and career. In a 2016 study conducted by me and Professor Yu Xie of the Department of Sociology at the Princeton University, we found that fathers who have two children spend more time on the job and less time taking care of family members than parents who have one child. For mothers, these effects are not significantly different for those with one and two children. Not only in the economic life of parents, the impacts on parents' subjective well-being are also gendered. Specifically, a father who had two children had more self-confidence in his career and future, and a mother who had two children felt happier, had a higher degree of life satisfaction, and had better self-rated social skills. That is to say, although more children bring gains in subjective well-being to both parents, the clear gender differences indicate that in contemporary China, gender division of labor within the family still exists. Apart from the differential distributions of parents' time, because mothers have more responsibility than their fathers for taking care of and raising children, their positive subjective well-being are all about the overall feeling of life and social interaction. Meantime, the responsibilities of providing for the family are still more borne by the fathers. Accordingly, fathers are only gaining better subjective well-being related to the development of themselves and their careers.

To conclude, it takes the joint efforts of the society and family to promote higher fertility. First, on the basis of existing policy support, how the government and employers can further cooperate with each other and provide young parents with longer-term and more flexible parental leaves is very important. What is more important is whether the society, families, and individuals can fully understand the different pressures brought about by children on the mothers and fathers, so that all can strive to establish more equal gender relations in the workplace and in the family. When the entire society and every family can willingly agree that men and women have the same right to work and are equally responsible for taking care of the family and children; when fathers are more proactively involved in childcare; when mothers can be relieved from the difficulty in juggling between career and family, the rise in fertility will not be so far away.