

# Marriage, families under stress as norms change

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Since Singapore gained independence, family and population policies have been an integral part of its nation-building strategies.

“Asian family values”, broadly conceived as love, care, mutual respect, filial piety and commitment, was inked as one of the core national “Shared Values” in the early 1990s.

Based on these principles, Singapore’s public policies have defined ideal family types largely as the three-generational household and the two-parent heterosexual families. Today, Singapore looks distinct from what it was five decades ago. The population has tripled in size, and is more globalised and much older; different racial and religious groups live together with a higher degree of integration; and family values and intergenerational ties remain relatively strong.

While the policies have largely been effective in maintaining an Asian family model by keeping out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation rare, and the divorce rate relatively low by international standards, the definitions of acceptable family behaviours have been contested on the ground. New unmet needs have increased over time for groups such as singles, never-married and divorced single parents, divorced foreign spouses, and same-sex partners. We discuss these issues in our new book, titled *Family And Population Changes In Singapore: A Unique Case In Global Family Change*.

## HIGH CHILDLESSNESS RATE

Some unintended consequences of the public policies and changing ideologies have nevertheless emerged. Today, Singapore has one of the world’s lowest fertility rates, highest childlessness rate, high singlehood rates, and a rapidly ageing population.

Singapore families are currently under considerable stress. The childlessness rate has increased sharply, from about 5 per cent for women who were born around 1930, to almost one quarter of the



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women born between 1966 and 1970 (aged 46 to 50 in 2016). This rate is higher than that in the United States and as high as the highest childlessness rate in Europe registered by German women born in 1968 – 23 per cent (Sobotka, 2017).

As 90 per cent of ever-married women have at least one child, this high childlessness rate is in large part due to the high proportion of Singapore young adults who have remained single. As of 2015, 17 per cent of Singapore women aged 35 to 39 are single. This rate is also high by international standards.

Even though the singlehood rate in many European countries is higher than this, fertility rates in those countries are higher than that in Singapore because many cohabiting couples there have children together. Family policies in those countries allow children who are born out of wedlock and their parents access to public benefits.

To tackle the low fertility rate in Singapore, it is of foremost importance to reduce the barriers for marriage. Statistics show that

singlehood rates are highest among Singapore Chinese women who on average are better educated and have a higher aspiration for, and commitment to, their careers. For them, one in five remains single by the ages of 35 to 39.

For this group, judging from the continually declining fertility rate, a long maternity leave and baby bonus have not been attractive incentives. However, more equal opportunity of employment advancement for women both before and after marriage may make them less hesitant to enter into marriage. A more flexible distribution of parental leave between spouses which may enable greater male participation may also be appealing.

## EDUCATION AND MARRIAGE

One of the most significant social changes in the 20th century was the rapid increase in women’s education around the world. In Singapore, female gross tertiary enrolment rate had increased phenomenally from 4 per cent in 1970 to 95 per cent in 2015, surpassing most Western

countries. According to the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report, women have outnumbered men in enrolling in tertiary education in more than 100 countries in the world (The World Economic Forum, 2015). Singapore is no exception.

Our previous research has shown that the proportion of women in tertiary education, among many indicators, is most highly correlated with marriage and fertility rates across regions. Many societies, however, have yet to make adequate adjustments to this sweeping social change in gender roles at the workplace and at home.

In America and some European countries that have more gender-egalitarian social norms and practices, better-educated women have started to have a higher marriage rate, a lower divorce rate, and a higher fertility rate. In contrast, in more conservative societies, women with higher education have lower marriage rates than those with lower education.

Analysts have argued that marriage is viewed as increasingly

unattractive to women in East Asia because it not only comes with a whole package of obligations to care for the young and old family members but also exerts a high cost on their careers.

## FACTORS AGAINST MARRIAGE

The low marriage and fertility trends in Singapore can be seen to reflect many young adults’ hesitation to form families, despite their desire to do so, due to several factors. First is the country’s slow institutional adaptation to the rapid change in gender roles both at the workplace and at home.

Second, the “kiasu” (afraid to lose or afraid to fail) culture that highly values success in a very competitive environment that leads to long work hours and high social pressure to achieve.

Third, a high cost of living, including the cost of child-rearing and caring for ageing parents.

Fourth, the long waiting time for a public housing unit for prospective couples.

And fifth, the narrow definition of “family” on which social policies and discourses are based that

provided limited support or penalised other family forms, including never-married or divorced single-parent families, cohabiting unions, singles and same-sex partnering.

A combination of these factors leads many young adults to perceive attaining a “successful” marriage and raising successful children as difficult or having a low return.

To raise marriage and fertility rates, some fundamental cultural shifts and institutional adaptations are imperative.

It is necessary to reduce gender inequality both at the work place and at home, change the “kiasu” culture by reducing work hours and relaxing pressure for competition for children and adults, increase longer-term in-kind or direct support for marriage and child-rearing costs, and to accept a more diverse life circumstances and choices of family types for Singaporeans.

Instead of focusing on the ideal structure of family, it will serve well for society to be reminded of the original definition of the “Singapore Family Values” – love, care, and concern; filial responsibility; mutual respect; commitment; and communication – which can also be attained in other family configurations as shown in chapters of our book.

Young adults today face a different set of life circumstances and challenges from previous generations, and may attach different meaning and values to marriage and parenthood. Perhaps some would prefer to cohabit first, which may lead to marriages. Relaxing divorce law might paradoxically increase marriages if young adults know there is a way out if the marriage does not work out; or the possibility of leaving a marriage might keep their spouses on their toes.

Open discussions about what Singaporeans view as desirable family norms and functions should occur. Public policies should then be adjusted based on agreement emerged from these discussions.

Family historians have shown that the functions and definition of family vary over time and across cultures. Only when institutions continue to adapt to prevailing social and economic changes can the family system in Singapore function effectively to provide both the private functions of fulfilling individual members’ emotional needs as well as to serve the public function of maintaining sustainability and cohesion in society.

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