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More uplifting Singapore story needed to boost baby confidence

Eugene K.B. Tan

For The Straits Times

Love, marriage and parenthood do not lend themselves easily to policy dictates and legislative fiat. At a societal level, Singapore grapples with these seemingly innocuous private choices.

The Government's Population in Brief 2019 publication, released last month, shows that the double whammy of extremely low fertility and an ageing population remains an abiding national concern. Singapore's resident total fertility rate (TFR) has been below the replacement level of 2.1 babies since the mid-1970s. Last year's TFR came in at 1.14, the lowest on record, even lower than Japan's 1.4. The TFR for the ethnic Chinese was 0.98, for Indians it was 1.0, and for Malays it was 1.85.

The delaying of marriage and family formation persists in spite of determined pro-natalist efforts such as the Marriage and Parenthood Package (MPP). And the anaemic TFR endures despite regular and increasingly generous enhancements to the MPP since its introduction in 2001.

From January next year, the Ministry of Health will remove the age limit of 45 for women who want to undergo in-vitro fertilisation. This policy change accommodates couples marrying and having children later. The Government is also carefully reviewing the ban on women freezing eggs for non-medical reasons.

To be sure, a decline in the fertility rate is not unusual in modernising societies. Education, equal opportunities, and changing attitudes towards women, children and family life contribute to fertility-limiting norms and choices.

Mindset changes will take time to spawn behavioural change in individuals, organisations and society that will result in an environment that is conducive to marriage and parenthood. In the meantime, nudges and incentives have to be maintained.

But it begs the question of why, in cohort after cohort since the 1970s, Singaporean couples have consistently preferred to have few children.

COSTS AND FEAR OF THE FUTURE
Concerns about the future are one factor. Couples may cite the high cost of living in Singapore as a reason for having zero, one, or at most two children.

Couples rationalise that having fewer children allows them to optimally focus their limited resources of time, energy and money, increasing the likelihood of their children succeeding in life.

The demographic malaise may also have to do with larger forces such as individualism, materialism and the obsession with getting ahead. The preoccupation with self results in increasing opportunity costs attached to marriage and childbearing.

The demands and sacrifices required to fulfil the material, moral and emotional needs of raising children are not seen as aligned with desired self-indulgence.

More worryingly, I often wonder if the baby bust also points to an unarticulated, inchoate fear of the future. By the time Singaporeans become young adults, they will be familiar with the nation's oft-repeated traits of vulnerability as a small country with no natural resources, buffeted by geopolitical uncertainties.

If Singaporeans internalise these concerns and uncertainties, then the affinity with low fertility is perhaps an adaptive response. It limits risk exposure to an environment perceived as threatening, and to an uncertain future.

To compound matters, Singapore's vulnerability to anthropogenic climate change may well have an impact on birth rates. Having children may no longer be thought of as a solely personal decision, but one heavily laden with ethical implications for the offspring, humanity and the planet.

All these may have come together and resulted in ultra-strategic calculations on the optimal number of children (zero, one or two). This concatenation of pessimism, materialism, hedonism and fear of the unknown imperils the quest for national fecundity.

Rather than a scarcity mindset based on a sense of vulnerability and fear of the future, Singapore would do well to emphasise an abundance mindset that speaks to



Children playing at Jubilee Park in the Fort Canning area. There is a need to discuss how the traits of Singapore as a materialistic, competitive society, as well as the narrative of the country as a vulnerable, resource-strapped society, might have created a climate where young couples choose to have fewer children, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

its ability to adapt, be resilient and to thrive despite the challenges.

Such a positive, optimistic mindset would be more conducive to bountiful family formation. After all, children represent the commitment to self-renewal and an investment in the future at the familial and societal levels.

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A society with few children has a very different complexion from one with many children. In the former, mindsets and outlooks would tend towards short-termism and consumption rather than investment.

An ageing population will lack the appetite to invest in the future, whether it is on infrastructure spending, the promotion of path-breaking but risky innovation, or benefits for young families and children.

In the discussion on ways to raise the fertility rate, a lot of attention is often focused on the dollars and cents involved, with the state giving generous baby bonus grants, subsidies to offset infant care and childcare costs, and giving tax incentives for parenthood.

Sociologists have also argued that there is a need to look at gender norms in society, specifically in terms of how they influence men's and women's attitudes towards gender roles at home and in the workplace.

Gender-equitable norms in the division of household chores and childcare, and work-life balance, may shift attitudes and behaviour towards family formation.

The desired norm should be that married couples can have children and fulfilling careers. For most couples, this need not be a binary either/or. However, it may entail doing away with the stereotypical valorisation of women's roles at home and the similar valorisation of men's roles in the workplace.

What is missing from this picture of fertility, however, is a discussion of how the prevailing traits of Singapore as a materialistic, competitive society, as well as the prevailing narrative of Singapore as a vulnerable, resource-strapped society, might have created a climate where young couples choose to have fewer children.

Singapore needs a more uplifting story about itself and a greater sense of optimism about the future. It also needs to promote gender equality at home and at work, to fire the ardour of its young couples.

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