

Celebrating families in Singapore

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was invited to participate in the *Family Conference*, held in Singapore to mark the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. **RUTH WESTON AND ALAN HAYES** discuss the issues raised in the *Regional Family Policy Forum*, on the first day of the conference.

"Have you brought joy to your family today?" This question was devised as the theme for year-long activities in Singapore to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family (IYF) in 2004. Behind the question is the challenging implication that it is everyone's responsibility to make an effort to inject happiness into family life and thereby strengthen family bonds, rather than to leave such outcomes to chance.

In Singapore, the tenth anniversary of the IYF was marked by a variety of events designed not only to reaffirm the importance of family life, but also to reinvigorate family life, and to make Singapore "a great place for families". These included fun activities for families, workshops to strengthen bonds between teenagers and parents, tips on the internet on simple ways of bringing joy to family members, and repeated reminders that family needs to take precedence over all other commitments in the busy schedules of Singaporeans.

The IYF celebrations culminated in a two-day Family Conference followed by a Family Festival (25-28 November 2004). The Family Conference was organised by Singapore's Committee on the Family, the IYF taskforce, and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. The conference comprised two parts: a *Regional Family Policy Forum* and *Family Matters Seminar*. Speakers from various countries were nominated to present papers and to join in panel discussions which involved considerable audience participation.

This article discusses issues raised in the papers presented at the *Regional Family Policy Forum* on day one.

Participants came from various countries in the region. Australians included: Professor Alan Hayes (Director) and Ruth Weston (a Principal Research Fellow) from the Australian Institute of Family Studies; two representatives from the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, David Kalisch (who is a member of the Institute's Board of Management) and Annabelle Cassells (Assistant Director, Capacity Building, International

Branch); Professor Peter McDonald (Head, Demography and Sociology Program, Australian National University); and Professor Gavin Jones (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore and former Head, Demography and Sociology Program, Australian National University).

The theme of the *Family Policy Forum's* first session, entitled "Keeping the Pulse on Families", focused on two questions: "What is the state of the family in Singapore and other countries in the region?" and "Are singlehood, marriage and divorce on the decline or improving?" The second on "Conflict, Divorce and the Law" focused on the role of the Family Court in managing family conflict and in "saving" marriages. The final session focused on "Building the Next Generation". Here, participants reflected on trends in the total fertility rate in different countries in the region and beyond, reasons for falls in fertility rates, repercussions of very low rates, and measures to stem or reverse trends.

In total, nine papers were presented during the Forum. Considerable consistency in findings or conclusions emerged not only within the three sessions but also across these sessions. This is not surprising given that all related to the wellbeing or illbeing of families (and thus communities and nations) in the region.



Members of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore, and Ruth Weston from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (fourth from left), display some recent Institute publications presented to the Ministry. From left: from the Rehabilitation and Protection Division are Ms Goh Poh Pho and Ms Rozita Bte Anwar; and from the Family Policy Unit are Ms Charlotte Beck (Director), Mr Choo Kin Wee, and Ms Tan Chin Fern.

Family formation trends, relationship stability and aspirations

The first paper was presented by Ruth Weston and co-authored by Lixia Qu (Australian Institute of Family Studies). Drawing on research conducted by the Institute and elsewhere, Weston and Qu showed that, despite the rise in cohabitation, the proportion of Australian adults who were unpartnered had increased across all ages. These trends were linked with progressive delays in marriage, a rise in the proportions of “never married” individuals across all ages, and an increasing fragility of relationships.

The authors noted that such trends contributed to the decline in Australia’s total fertility rate and thus the ageing of the population, an increase in sole-parent families and “couple only” families, an increase in the number of transitions that individuals experience through the course of their lives, and some changing patterns of parenting. Despite these trends, Weston and Qu referred to other research suggesting that most Australians want to marry and have at least two children, but a substantial minority who hold these ambitions are unlikely to achieve them. They thus noted that a key challenge for Australia was helping Australians achieve their ambitions of strong and stable marriage and family life.

Singaporean women also appear to place a strong emphasis on marriage and childbearing. According to Associate Professor Paulin Tay Straughan (National University of Singapore), Singaporean women want to have an average of three children, live in a nuclear family, participate in paid work, and see their husbands make an equitable contribution to household responsibilities. Nevertheless, the chances of Singaporeans achieving marriage and children appear to be diminishing. Like Australia, Singapore has experienced an increase in the proportions of never married women aged in their thirties and forties (Jones 2003).

Unlike Australian couples, Singaporeans tend to marry directly rather than cohabit initially. Children tend to live with their parents until they marry and most live in state-subsidised housing upon marriage. This subsidisation, organised by the Housing Development Board (HDB), is provided to first-time home buyers upon marriage, thereby encouraging marriage. (Purchasing the home with a parent is another avenue for receiving HDB-subsidised housing.)

Straughan highlighted the importance of relatively long courtships and family support for sustained, happy marriages. She noted that potential partners in life are now found through

the workplace or friends rather than through the family; the match is often one of strangers with little commonality of backgrounds. It is through the courtship process, Straughan argued, that couples have a chance of learning not only about each other but also about each partner’s family of origin with whom they will remain closely involved. Her research suggests that couples are more likely to experience sustained marriages if, during courtship, they spend time assessing their compatibility regarding money matters, expectations about their roles and responsibilities in marriage, their life goals and priorities, in-law issues, sexual intimacy and family planning. Religious preparation and discussion of marriage issues with family and friends also increased the chances of marital happiness.

While Australians have considerable opportunity for assessing their compatibility for marriage via cohabitation, the divorce rate in Singapore is lower than that in Australia (around 8 per 1000 married men and women in Singapore in 2003, compared with around 12 per 1000 in Australia in 2001 – the latest year in which data are available) (ABS 2004; Heng and Png 2004). Nevertheless, the divorce rate in Singapore has been increasing, and Weston and Qu presented evidence suggesting that, in Australia, first partnerships that begin with cohabitation are increasingly likely to end in separation.

Dysfunctional couple relationships and effectiveness of interventions

Given the increased instability of relationships, the *Family Policy Forum* also included papers designed to enhance understanding of dysfunctional couple relationship dynamics and the effectiveness of related interventions.

The paper by Associate Professor Lee Wai-yung (University of Hong Kong and founding director of the HKU Family Institute) drew on her expertise as a marriage and family therapist working with Asian-Chinese couples and on her research based on Chinese families from different Asian countries who sought therapy. She presented video clips from her clinical practice to demonstrate the central role that dysfunctional couple dynamics can play in the development of severe psychosocial disorders in children and she outlined different patterns of family dynamics that tend to affect children in different ways.

Dr Lee noted that Asian cultures place a high priority on family loyalty and harmony. If the couple cannot manage this, then the children may attempt to do so. Her research suggests that one pattern, thought to generate psychosomatic problems in children, seemed particularly prevalent amongst Asian-Chinese families. This pattern involves one partner (often the wife) attempting to induce change in the other through demands, complaints and criticisms, and the other avoiding conflict by withdrawing. Another that



The International Year of the Family (IYF) stall at the Family Festival. The famous IYF logo depicts a heart connected to another heart and sheltered by a roof, symbolising life and love in the home, with an opening to reflect continuity with an element of uncertainty.



Pictured at the conference are, from left: Professor Alan Hayes (AIFS Director), Dr Nguyen Thi Lan (Director, Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children Training Centre), and two members of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services – Annabelle Cassells (Assistant Director, Capacity Building, International Branch), and David Kalisch (Executive Director, Families and Children Group).

she often observed involved each partner wanting nothing to do with the other – a situation that may lead children to assume the task of keeping the family together. She also found that the pace of life for husbands and wives who sought therapy often diverge, with wives typically “running” faster and men, slower, through a mutual and reciprocal “training” process.

A key policy issue emerging from this research concerned the need to identify means by which adequate “psychological space” can be created between family members. Without such space children can become too attached to family problems and give up their growth and sometimes, their life. Dr Lee criticised a 2001 report concerning family services in Hong Kong which recommended that child-oriented services tap family strengths. In her view, service delivery policies also need to take into account research that has a clinical focus.

The second session, entitled, “Conflict, Divorce and the Law” was designed to identify the role of family courts in managing family conflict and in saving marriages. This issue was addressed by two speakers: Professor Stella Quah (Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore) and District Judge Lim Hui Min (Deputy Registrar, Family Court of Singapore). While Quah based her conclusions on research and Justice Lim on court-based experience with families, both agreed that, by the time many couples seek help or begin divorce proceedings, their relationship has deteriorated to a point where help is ineffective.

Quah argued that relationship problems can be approached as a war or a game. In a game, one person might lose on one occasion but win on another. In her view, many spouses who are susceptible to separation are bent on winning every time and on humiliating each other, rather than on negotiating and bargaining. In this war-like approach, grievances accumulate, leading to a sense that the price paid for this relationship is too great. In line with Lee’s above-noted observation that husbands often withdraw while wives repeatedly criticise, Quah argued that men often create a wall of silence – a “passive aggressive” approach that can escalate problems.

Consistent with Straughan’s above-noted arguments, Quah emphasised the importance of the courtship process, but maintained that susceptible couples often avoid using this time to discuss problematic issues for fear that such discussion might end the relationship. Quah listed several other background factors that may contribute to the couple’s declining relationship, including personal and social values, friends and family, and job-related pressures. Quah also noted that, for those who apply for divorce, the divorce proceedings are likely to worsen relationships between the couple.

Quah also pointed out that the primary duty of the Family Court is adjudication – that is, making a formal decision. Adjudication is based on what seems “right” rather than on “doing

good” (which implies welfare). In Singapore, mediation may be used to minimise costs, but Quah raised the issue as to whether the role of mediation is to “do right” and/or to “do good” or to achieve neither of these alternatives. Susceptible couples may receive family counselling which emphasises reconciliation as much as the Family Court emphasises conciliation. But family counselling cannot be undertaken until people file for divorce. By this stage, couples are typically incapable of resolving their differences.

While Quah noted many variations between countries in Asia, she concluded that the Family Court and community intervention resources need to work cooperatively but in their respective distinct domains of conciliation and reconciliation.

Justice Lim also emphasised that fact that, by the time couples enter the Family Court system, they are hurt, bitter and quarrelsome, with each blaming the other for their difficulties. More often than not, the divorce goes through.

In Singapore, the ground for divorce is irretrievable breakdown as indicated by proof of adultery, “unreasonable behaviour”, two years’ desertion, three years’ separation with each party’s consent, or four years’ separation without such consent. But Justice Lim pointed out that the grounds people put on paper are often very different from those that led to the relationship breakdown. For instance, she noted that spouses with low expectations about the quality of marriage may have little appreciation of the need to work at their marriage, while those with high expectations are unlikely to have these met. But she also observed that the nature of problems tolerated by people vary, for example, violence, adultery or personal hygiene. Achievement of justice, in the mind of each individual, requires that the Court support his or her vision of what life should be like.

The divorce process in Singapore involves a divorce petition being filed – along with a parenting plan and property plan where appropriate. The petition is served on the respondent who then indicates if he or she is contesting the matter. Counselling and mediation are then offered, with mediation involving legally trained professionals who focus on legal issues rather than on helping the couple to resolve their difficulties. Nevertheless, mediators may refer the couple to counselling. The couple may agree to patch up their differences or to divorce. If they fail to reach agreement, then a contested divorce trial takes place. A decree nisi is granted and ancillary matters are then handled. Before the decree absolute is made, the divorce petition can be withdrawn if each spouse agrees about this.

Justice Lim argued that reconciliation means more than the absence of divorce and is very difficult to achieve, given that each spouse blames the other (or the other’s family) for the relationship difficulties. She noted that without forgiveness,

understanding and love there can be no reconciliation. She felt that delaying finalisation of the divorce process is neither good for the children nor the couple and that a better approach is to provide prevention and early intervention programs.

Having children

Weston and Qu pointed out that delays in partnership formation, increased instability of relationships and the decline in overall partnership rates contributed to the fall in Australia’s total fertility rate (now 1.75 babies per women in 2003). However, this rate is considerably higher than that in Singapore (1.25 in 2003), according to Dr Yap Mui Tend (Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore), who presented a paper on marriage and procreation in Singapore.



From left: Charlotte Beck (Director, Family Policy Unit) pictured with Professor Alan Hayes (Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies), and Professor Peter McDonald (Head, Demography and Sociology Program, Australian National University) during a break between conference sessions.

At the Singapore conference, children sing a song conveying the message that people need to make time for their families.



Japan, too, has a very low fertility rate (1.29 in 2003) – an issue that formed the basis of the paper by Dr Makato Atoh (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Japan). And according to Professor Bhassorn Limanonda (Chulalongkorn University, Thailand), the total fertility rate in Thailand is now below replacement level (1.82), having fallen from 6.2 in the mid 1960s. The total fertility rate in Thailand is highest in the South (2.25), a predominantly Muslim area, and very low in Bangkok (1.17).

Professor Peter McDonald (Australian National University) pointed out that below replacement fertility initially appeared in some countries in Europe. It was commonly but incorrectly assumed that this would be a temporary phenomenon – a view still held by some demographers. However, he reported that more than 60 countries now have fertility levels that are below replacement level and around 28 countries now have a total fertility rate below 1.5. Furthermore, he warned that no country with a fertility rate below 1.5 has ever managed to achieve a subsequent rise in this rate.

Implications of low fertility rates

Both Atoh and Limanonda suggested that current fertility trends generated some positive outcomes. For instance, Limanonda claimed that, with a smaller percentage of dependent children in the population, opportunities to improve children's quality of life would increase. Atoh, on the other hand, noted that a consequent decrease in the size of the population would reduce over-crowding, housing costs, land prices, and energy consumption, and promote environmental conservation.

Nevertheless, these speakers, along with McDonald, noted a number of serious negative repercussions. McDonald pointed out that, where fertility rates are below 1.5, the size of the population falls at a spiralling rate with each generation, and massive migration would be required to compensate. He further claimed that, in the absence of immigration and improved life expectancy, a fertility rate of 1.26 would see the country's population declining from 3.49 million in 2004 to 1.49 million in 100 years, and a total disappearance of the population in 200 years. McDonald also noted that, in 20–25 years time, there would be a decline in the "home grown" labour supply to support the ageing population, with all this decline occurring amongst younger workers. In his view, such a situation will threaten a country's competitiveness in the context of rapidly changing technology. He argued that young workers whose training has occurred most recently are required to assimilate this new technology. Finally, McDonald argued that societal institutions tend to adapt to the relative absence of children in the long term and become child-unfriendly.

Consistent with the findings outlined by Weston and Qu, McDonald also pointed out that people in countries with low fertility rates are not having the number of children they want to have, even though preferences tend to be as low as one, two or three children. He maintained that such dashed hopes reflect a important societal problem. "Something is drastically wrong", he said, "with a country that cannot reproduce itself".

Atoh and Limanonda also emphasised the difficulties that Japan and Thailand will face regarding supporting the increased number of elderly people. They argued that there will be fewer carers for an increased number of elderly people and a relatively small labour supply. Atoh noted that life expectancy in Japan is now 85 years for women and 78 years for men, and by 2050, Japan will have the highest rate of older people (aged 65 or more years) in the world. Other negative outcomes

identified by Atoh include a shrinking of the consumer market and possible stagnation due to reduced opportunities for investment, increased difficulties in achieving self-reliance for ageing and depopulating communities, possible declines in productivity associated with an ageing labour force, and a weakening of international political influence.

Explanations for very low or falling fertility rates

Formulation of policies to stem or reverse fertility declines requires an understanding of the reasons behind these declines. Several reasons were suggested by the speakers.

In all the countries discussed, delays in marriage, a fall in overall marriage rates and increase in divorce rates were implicated in the fall in fertility rates. Atoh, for instance, indicated that in Japan, where cohabitation is rare, the proportion of never married people in their twenties and thirties increased from 21 per cent to 54 per cent and from 7 per cent to 26 per cent respectively. Furthermore, he noted that the mean age at first marriage in Japan increased from 26.9 to 29.1 for men and from 24.2 to 27.4 for women between 1970 and 2000. Increased age at marriage compresses the time during which women can have children.

While couples in Thailand tend to marry at a relatively early age, Limanonda reported that the mean age at marriage for Thai women had also increased (from 21.6 to 24.0 years between 1960 and 2000), with the increase being greater in urban than rural areas. She noted that divorce rates have also increased in Thailand. Such trends led Limanonda to raise the question as to whether or not the value attached to marriage and family (highlighted by Qu and Weston and by Straughan) is, in fact, as strong as that attached to having freedom.

The introduction of modern forms of contraception, along with market forces and a country's economic outlook, were also emphasised as factors contributing to falls in fertility. McDonald pointed out that revolutionary changes in the economy and labour market during the 1980s and 1990s resulted in jobs being far less secure than in the past. While he emphasised the importance of market deregulation, he argued that it is incumbent on businesses and societies to compensate for these changes that are preventing people from having the number of children they want. Yap presented trends in fertility rates in Singapore since 1957, linking some of the fluctuations within the general decline to factors such as the Year of the Tiger (1986) when the rate fell to 1.4, and the cycle of economic downturns and recoveries.

Atoh compared trends for Japan with those for other countries. He noted several consistencies between Japan and Southern European countries that also have very low fertility rates. For instance, compared with other developed countries with low fertility rates, these countries provide a low level of economic support for families with children and have low female labour force participation rates (suggesting the work-family policies are ineffective and insufficient). In addition, he argued that traditional family values may operate as a barrier to union formation. Male dominance, a gendered division of labour, and support for elderly members of families still tend to be emphasised in Japan.

It thus appears that many women in Japan, like those in Singapore and elsewhere, prefer marriages in which they and



their husbands cooperate in sharing both income earning and domestic responsibilities. According to Atoh, the burden on women resulting from their husband's failure to share the domestic load, along with their limited access to child care, has contributed to Japan's very low fertility rate.

Policy responses

Given the close links between the formation and stability of partnerships and fertility trends, many of the policy options discussed in relation to fertility rates concerned helping people form strong and stable relationships, in family-friendly communities.

McDonald maintained that the only way to enable people to have the number of children they want is to improve family policy directed towards increasing the fertility rate. He maintained that immigration can be used to address the declining population, but to offset the fall in the population at younger ages would require migration levels that would result in a population that would mostly consist of migrants. The alternative is to increase the fertility rate.

Improvements to family policy represent an important component of the response to population ageing initiated by the Japanese Government. According to Atoh, the Japanese Government had, until the end of the 1980s, based its family policies on the male breadwinner model. Full-time homemakers received tax exemption and a basic pension entitlement without paying any contribution while mothers in paid work received a short period of birth leave only. Given the increased participation of mothers in paid work, these policies were overhauled in 1990. Currently, the government is attempting to increase rates of labour force participation of both mothers and older people. New policies for workers with children in Japan include 12 months' parental leave, compensation for parental leave amounting to 40 per cent in 2001, and the expansion of child care services. But despite the availability of parental leave, Atoh reported that only 56 per cent of eligible mothers took this leave in 1999.

In addition, Atoh noted that the Japanese Government has passed two bills, resulting in the establishment of two committees responsible for formulating policies relating to low fertility. One of these committees focuses on establishing means of coping with a low fertility society, and the other focuses on measures to support the development of the next generation.

Policies to support parents combine work and family are also clearly on the agenda in Singapore. Yap pointed out that, in 1987, the Singapore Government switched its population policy from one that discouraged fertility to one that attempted to encourage couples to have three or more children. Since that time, a series of consecutive measures have been adopted in Singapore to support parenthood. Yap assessed the contribution that these measures, along with other concurrent forces, to the fertility rate apparent upon their introduction. Despite initial improvements in fertility rates linked with these and other factors, the rate continued on its downward slide.

While a multi-pronged approach was clearly in evidence for several years, Yap emphasised the fact that the most recent package, introduced in August 2004, is directed towards furthering the promotion of marriage, the affordability of

childbirth and of raising children, and opportunities for couples to improve work-life balance, including increasing their child care options. Examples include the introduction of a top-up HDB housing grant which is now offered to singles who marry; enabling Singaporeans to use Medisave (a compulsory savings scheme) for fourth and higher order births and for pre-delivery expenses; removal of an age criterion for receipt of the Parenthood Tax Rebate (previously, mothers aged 28 years or more when they gave birth to their second child were ineligible for this rebate); increased (paid) maternity leave (from 8 to 12 weeks); a child care subsidy; the introduction of a lower tax on the use of foreign domestic workers; and the introduction of tax relief where grandparents are caring for the children.

These and other measures outlined by Yap combine with continuing government strategies designed to help couples find life-long partners. However, Yap warns that time pressures experienced by single people often operate as a barrier in this endeavour.

The list of Singapore's parenting support measures outlined above is by no means comprehensive. As Australia and other countries attempt to grapple with declining rates, governments and researchers continue to monitor closely the apparent effectiveness of these policies and those introduced elsewhere. The challenges around couple formation, stability and wellbeing, and fertility remain enormous.

Overall, the conference provided all participants with an excellent opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of pressing family-related issues in the region and to establish and strengthen networks with a view to extending cooperative endeavours in the region.

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