

Extra childcare leave not the way to raise fertility rates: Harvard professor^[1]

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EXCERPTS

SINGAPORE — Giving extremely long maternity and childcare leave to women, as part of family-friendly policies, is “not the answer” to boosting fertility rates, said a Harvard University sociologist yesterday.

Such a move will reinforce the “gendered division of labour” in the household, where women stay at home to do housework and take care of the children while men work, said Professor Mary Brinton, Reischauer Institute Professor of Sociology from the university’s Department of Sociology, at a public lecture and dialogue session on family and population.

It will also reinforce employers’ bias against hiring women, especially mothers, thus placing them on a lower rung in the workplace.

Prof Brinton said being absent from the workplace beyond six months, which she viewed as the best “maximum” period of leave for mothers, would also impact their earnings and promotion possibilities “negatively”.

To avoid such complications, she suggested that family-friendly policies could start with new fathers being required to take childcare leave, on top of offering paid leave for both parents.

“The policy can begin with fathers’ required leave being short — for example, one or two weeks — so that at least the idea of fathers’ leave becomes ‘normalised’, and it becomes taken for granted that fathers need and want to be involved in infant- and child-care,” said Prof Brinton.

Weighing in on the subject, Senior Minister of State (Prime Minister’s Office) Josephine Teo, who gave a speech and participated in a dialogue at the event, noted that in recent years, employers have been more accommodating when it comes to creating a pro-family workplace environment, though there were a few who showed “grudging acceptance”.

At the same time, granting flexible work arrangements — such as flexi-place, flexi-time and flexi-load — to parents could create resentment among their co-workers, especially in situations where only a small group of employees benefit from them, she said.

“Such flexi-work arrangements should not be confined to parents only ... Their co-workers need them too, to support other family members, like the elderly, and if you leave it as a benefit only for (employees) with young children, it could breed an unhealthy sense of resentment.”

Hence, such flexi-work arrangements should be made widely available to employees where possible, Mrs Teo added.

She also urged millennials to change their mindset about starting families, noting that it might be outdated to put such plans on the back-burner for the sake of one’s career. Rather, the young should consider building their careers “in tandem” with parenthood.

Singapore’s total fertility rate stood at 1.24 in 2015, according to the National Population and Talent Division.

And rather than seeing one’s career as “a single penultimate peak”, Mrs Teo said that having multiple careers might become the norm, and so Singaporeans should view this as a “mountain range of satisfying career peaks throughout life”.

She added that the “tempo” of a career in the 21st century would be different, as workers would need time to constantly refresh their skills and “recharge and retool”.

“All of this means there will never be a time when career-building is done and learning can end ... If marriage and parenthood are to feature at all, they must be priorities earlier rather than later in life.”

Adding that housing, childcare policies, and workplace and community support are key to making Singapore more family-friendly, Mrs Teo said it is important to be “in step” with society so that people feel “empowered” to tap the benefits available to them.

Expressing optimism about Singapore's way forward, Mrs Teo said that employers have to be shown that adopting pro-family policies is not detrimental to their business.

"And you have to let others know that (being pro-family) is not as difficult as they think, that it is doable, and we have to start taking those baby steps and try to bring it to a tipping point, where everyone is doing it now and it becomes a new norm."

The event was organised by the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore and the NUS Global Asia Institute.

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